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OR, The Man in the Satin Mask.

A Tale of the Dread Gray Clan.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"SOL SPHINX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MERCY SHARP'S HUSBAND.

It was precisely ten o'clock at night, as Mercy Sharp afterward had reason to recollect, when her husband Toby came home and stole into the house as was his usual habit.

She heard him stop at the head of the stairs and remain silent for some time.

Slipping from the chamber she looked into the hall and saw him in the light that prevailed, drawing his boots.

"What on earth does the man mean?" she thought, watching him. "He never did that before."

She did not watch him long for he was some-

"IT IS WONDERFUL!" SAID THE SHADOWER. "SHE IS FINISHING THE STORY I TOLD HER. SHE IS ACTUALLY TELLING ALL ABOUT THE DEATH OF TOBY SHARP."

times not in the best of humor, and retiring from the scene, she waited for him to make his appearance.

But he came not. Mercy Sharp with wide-open eyes wondered where Toby could be and after awhile she began another reconnaissance.

This time she found no one in the house. She went from room to room, but no Toby.

The Sharps had no children, consequently she had none to quiet on this particular night; but by and by she felt her own fears rising and when she came back to the bedroom after her futile hunt, she was all in a tremble.

Was it possible that she had really seen no living person—that the figure drawing a pair of boots at the top of the steps was not of flesh and blood?

Mrs. Sharp thought over this until she could not breathe for very fear.

But the man in the house was so like Toby—so had his movements and manner—that she could not come to any other conclusion but that he had stolen back home for a purpose and had gone off, as he thought, without disturbing her.

Of course there was no more sleep for Mercy Sharp that night, and when morning came with her lord and master not in the house, she nearly fell from her chair.

He had not remained out all night before for a long time. She did not believe that he gambled any, and was quite sure that he looked not upon the wine when it was red.

He had told her once that he had new employment, but further than the mere announcement he did not go, and she had not asked him about it.

The day waned and Toby was still absent.

Mercy Sharp was a queer woman. She never confided her troubles to her neighbors. What was hers belonged to no one else, and she did not believe in betraying to others what one should keep to one's self.

But before another night came she was thinking about taking the matter of Toby's absence to one who was not her neighbor.

A good many years before the date of our story Mercy Sharp—her name, of course, was not Sharp then—had for a playmate a boy who had grown to manhood and by some chance had drifted to New York. There he had an office of his own where he thought out some of the darkest mysteries of crime that puzzled those whose business it was to bring the guilty to justice.

Mercy Sharp dressed for the street, and went out. She knew where the detective's office was, and, as she knew him well she did not deem it worth her while to formally remind him of the acquaintance of their childhood.

She had reached a certain corner when some one touched her arm in a manner which could not have been accidental and looking up she beheld the face of a man which startled her.

"Mrs. Sharp, eh?" asked this individual.

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs. Mercy Sharp of O—street?"

"Of course. There is but one Mrs. Mercy Sharp in this city that I know of and I'm that woman."

"Your husband—"

The man stopped for some reason and smiled—at least Mrs. Sharp thought he did.

"Why don't you go on? I can stand anything after the ordeal I have passed through."

He drew her nearer the building and continued:

"If you are looking for him, and I suppose you are, you won't find him where you are going. He was found in the river."

The woman gave a quick gasp and her hand nervously opened her shawl, as if for air.

Found in the river! Toby Sharp a "floater?"

The wife seemed to recover suddenly; at any rate resolution lit up the depths of her eyes.

"You must not trifle with me. I saw him last night at home, but he did not stay. Toby Sharp is not the sort of man who would deliberately go to his death. He had good cause for living, for he had a wife of whom he was proud if I do say it myself, and—"

"My good woman, I have heard sermons before and I can't say that I like them. You must excuse me. You will find the body of your husband at the morgue. Good-night!"

He lifted his hat just a little and the sharp eyes of the woman saw on his forehead a scar which in after days she was vividly to recall.

She watched him out of sight and then looked in another direction.

What should she do?

At that time she was not far from the detective's office and the morgue was on the other side of the city.

"I will take Van Cue with me," she said, to herself at last. "I won't go to the morgue alone and, as I firmly believe there is murder in this matter, I want him to take the case at once, for Toby Sharp never went to the river of his own accord."

She continued her journey to the little room occupied by Velvet Van, the ferret, and knocked nervously at the door.

Half a minute later she stood in the room and was confronted by a boy of sixteen who wanted to know what she wanted.

"Where's your master?"

"Out."

"When will he come in?"

"That depends."

Mercy felt her patience leaving her.

"Look here, Miss"—the boy always addressed a female as "Miss"—"he was called off by a matter which came to him in a very mysterious manner. I heard him say something about a floater and I guess he's on that lay."

"Heavens! it may be the very person I am interested in!" cried the woman. "And he is at the morgue now?"

"Most likely if the body's there," grinned the detective's boy, and, waiting to hear no more, Mercy Sharp quitted the office and was soon tearing down the street again.

She knew where the morgue was, for some time before she had entered its gloomy precincts to look at the body of a young girl whose beauty was a theme for the imaginative reporter. Now she was going to it again—this time to gaze, as she believed, upon the features of her own husband.

This time she was followed—followed with the tread of the sneaking tigress; not by a man but by a person of her own sex—a veiled woman who kept her in sight almost from the moment when she came down from Velvet Van's office.

If Mercy Sharp had looked back she might not have seen the gliding figure at her heels, but she did not think of such a thing as espionage, and kept on her way.

She was within a square of the building of the dead when she saw a man standing under the glare of a lamp—the same person who had stopped her on the street and told her of her husband's death.

There was no mistaking the man for he was clad in the same garments.

The woman recoiled and mechanically shrunk into the shadows of the houses.

In another moment a second man joined the first and the two walked toward her.

"Merciful Heaven! What if I am discovered by those men?" fell from the woman's lips and she seemed to worm her way into the thick wall of the building.

The second man was a little taller than the first and had about him an air of refinement. He walked erect and looked around as if he feared some one might be on the watch.

They passed within a few feet of where the breathless woman hugged the wall and she got as good a look at them as she could.

"I'm using my eyes for some one else," she thought. "I am working for the man who will avenge me because we were schoolmates together years and years ago and he told me once that if ever I needed help in his line to come to him without delay."

It was some seconds before the woman was permitted to quit her place against the wall, and when she did so the two men had turned the nearest corner and were out of sight.

Once more she was on her way to the official dead-house of the city. The hour was not late and she was sure she would be admitted, especially since she was ready to identify one of the bodies on the slabs.

She gained the door and was there met by a man who had just come out.

"Well, madam, what is it?"

Mercy fell back and stared at the speaker.

"I want to look at the face of my husband," she stammered.

"How do you know he's here?"

"I have been told so. I am Mrs. Sharp and Tobias Sharp who was found to-day in the river was my husband."

The man turned back and held an inner door open for her.

With her heart in her throat Mrs. Sharp slipped into the building, and was led to the superintendent's office.

There were a few questions and an attendant was told to show her to the dead room.

"Wait a moment," suddenly said the wife. "I want to see the superintendent," and she turned back.

"Who first recognized my husband?" she asked.

"What's that? He hasn't been recognized yet."

"But the two men who were here just a few minutes ago?"

"There were no men here."

Mercy Sharp went back and entered the dead room.

Two minutes later she was gazing upon a face which was ghastly in its whiteness. She leaned forward till her face was near it as it could get, and all at once she recoiled and staggered back, to be caught by the man who had led her to the place.

"Killed! murdered! I will put the detective on the track at once!" she cried.

During the next ten minutes Mercy Sharp had formally identified body No. 4 in the morgue, and was on the street with one desire uppermost in her heart—the finding of her friend Velvet Van, the ferret, and the placing of him on the trail of the hand that had taken life.

If she could have looked into the future would she have done this?

But, Mercy Sharp did not know what was ahead.

CHAPTER II.

THE SATIN MASK.

DOCTOR JULES JAGGER was one of the most noted physicians of New York. He had a practice which in the course of a year netted him a great deal of money, and those who employed him were able to pay the enormous bills he charged. He seemed to know much about the mysterious afflictions which bothered the human family, and when there was a really puzzling case in medical science his opinion was sought, and what he said went a long way.

It was while Mercy Sharp was waiting for her husband, not knowing that he lay at that very hour among the unclaimed dead at the morgue, Doctor Jagger received a note which took him to one of the prominent avenues where he rung the bell of a house which had its mystery and was admitted.

Though the shades of night were beginning to steal over the city, the interior of the house was lit up so that the eminent doctor could find his way to a room to the right of the hall, and when he had crossed the threshold he was addressed in a clear voice by a man who reclined in a chair with great velvet arms.

Doctor Jagger went forward and shook hands with the occupant of the chair.

The strangest thing about this man was that not a vestige of his face was to be seen.

It was covered with a mask of rather close-fitting satin, and while a little of the contour of his features was observable, not a mite of flesh greeted the doctor's eye.

"I don't look much like a sick man—that is, so far as you can see, doctor," said this person. "I am the patient you have on hand now, and I want you to examine me carefully."

Doctor Jagger knew something of the house and its occupant. That is, a good many people knew that the satin mask had always covered the face of its owner and that he was a mystery to the outside world.

He was called Halliday Hood by the City Directory, but by the world at large he was known as the Man in the Satin Mask, for some one had carried from the house his peculiarity, and Halliday Hood was a puzzle to those beyond the stoop.

Doctor Jagger fell back in his chair and looked at the man before him.

"Take me as I am. You want my pulse, of course," and a wrist was put forward.

The doctor leaned toward it and laid one of his soft fingers on the pulse. After awhile he placed one ear to the man's heart and listened for a time.

Not a word was spoken until the examination had progressed some time.

"They tell me that you can measure one's time," said the Man in the Satin Mask.

A smile passed over the doctor's face.

"Do you want the truth?" he asked.

"I want nothing else. I don't pay a doctor for prevaricating."

"And I don't like to prevaricate. I can measure your time pretty closely."

"Well?"

"You may last two months."

"No more, doctor?"

"You may be dead in a week."

"There is no cure?"

"For you, none."

"That is what I thought when I sent for you, but I wanted you to measure the time. Will sudden excitement help me along?"

"Yes; but you are not the man to become suddenly excited. You are cool."

"I am very cool. There is nothing that can excite me and make my blood run faster than usual through my veins. What is the fee?"

The masked man opened a little drawer in the table before him.

The doctor named his bill and a check was given.

"Doctor, you couldn't measure my time, say to the very day, could you?" queried the strange being, and it seemed to the man of skill that he saw a smile beneath the satin mask.

"No one can do that; that is with Deity."

"I thought so."

The man fell back in his chair and was silent for a moment.

Halliday Hood was possessed of a fine figure, every curve was in keeping with the standard human faultlessness. He was reputed to be more than a millionaire, and those who had seen the interior of the house stood ready to confirm these rumors.

His history was unknown. He had taken the house and lived there, attending to his own affairs, which did not seem to bother him much; but there were men who said that sometimes at the dead hours of the night a closed carriage would drive away from the mansion and that it always bore off a man who came from the house with his face in mask.

Doctor Jagger may not have heard these stories; but they were afloat all the same.

When he left the room and had turned his back on his patient who was the victim of a disease which would have been an important contribution to medical science, Halliday Hood turned his chair toward the nearest wall and pulled a green cord that hung from the ceiling.

In an instant a door opened and a young girl came into the room.

She was not past nineteen and was as beautiful as a dream. The youthful figure was willowy and the face rounded and without a fault.

She approached the man in the chair and halted at the table.

"He was here, that renowned doctor about whom the papers have so much to say," remarked the Man in the Satin Mask.

There was no reply.

"He gave me his professional opinion and it cost me fifty dollars; but what of that? You have to pay for skill nowadays."

"That is true, and much of it is not worth what you give for it."

Halliday Hood drummed on the edge of the table with fingers almost as small and white as those of the girl who was watching him.

"I have two months yet," said he. "I may go off in a week; but by no skill can I be kept alive beyond the limit I have mentioned."

"Did he say so?"

"He said so, this great doctor who can measure one's life; but not to the very last day. Muriel, I want you to go now."

A sudden pallor overspread the face of the young girl.

"Did you hear me? I want you to go now." She did not stir.

"There must be no refusal on your part. You are to leave this house, and what passes here from now on is not to be known to you."

The following moment she had fallen forward and her hand was wildly clutching his arm.

"Let me stay! I have become attached to you. For God's sake don't send me away now. I want to be near you when the last hour comes—"

"To lift the mask and look at my face," he laughed. "To behold the hidden countenance of the man known to the world as Halliday Hood? I won't submit to such a thing. No, Muriel; I have provided for you and when I am dead you will come back and get what is yours. Everything will be kept in trust for you, never fear; I have everything arranged and no mistake will occur."

He looked up at her and watched the play of light and shadow on her face.

"Shall I have the carriage come to the side-door?" and once more his hand reached for the green bell-rope.

"No. I have made up my mind, and I know where to go," said she. "If I have to quit your side, I want no one to know what becomes of me."

"Perhaps that is best."

"I will not quit the city, and will wait for the end with the same solicitude that I have waited in this house. But you will be alone."

"No, not alone. I will have a companion, and when the end has come, and I have fought my last fight against the Clan, you may know more than you know now."

Muriel withdrew and went slowly up the broad steps in the hall beyond the room.

She seemed to be talking to herself, for murmurs fell from her tongue, but she kept on to a little room on the top floor.

There she remained half an hour. When she came down she was clad in a plain dress, and carried a small sachel in one hand.

She opened the door that led to the room where he had left the Man in the Satin Mask and looked in.

He was not at the table, but the chair there was filled by another form.

"That man above all other I hate!" said Muriel, shutting the door which she had opened without noise. "He is the shadow that constantly falls across my path. I won't let him know that I am going away. Is he to be the companion of which my guardian spoke? If he is, God pity the man in the mask!"

Muriel paused on the outer step of the mansion, but not for long.

She glided along the street, keeping in the shadows of the houses until she gained a portion of the city where she knocked at a door which was opened by a little girl.

"Here I am, Juno," said the young girl. "Are you alone?"

"Not quite. Grandpa is at work."

Muriel seemed to shudder, but allowed the child to conduct her to another door, where she was left.

After a pause there the fugitive from the mansion on the avenue lifted the latch and went in.

The room was a workshop, and was occupied at the time. A little old man, with eyes that fairly glittered, sat at a bench hammering long pieces of steel on a tiny anvil. He did not hear her for the sounds of his hammer, and Muriel stopped just beyond the threshold and watched him some time before she advanced.

"I am here at last, Papa Ramon," said the girl.

In an instant the hammer ceased to rise and fall and the man turning on his stool eyed her sharply.

"What made you come hither? Don't you know that you bring evil to this house? Why, you are worse than death itself!"

The old man spoke harshly, but all at once his eyes seemed to soften and he laid one hand on Muriel's arm.

"How did you leave him?" he asked.

"As usual, so far as I could see. He sent for Doctor Jagger and was told that—"

"That he hadn't long to live, eh?"

The girl nodded.

"And he didn't want you to see what he looked like when he was dead?"

"That was it."

Ramon Ravenclaw slid from his seat and touched a button in the wall.

"No, not yet," he said, closing the door which had opened. "Time enough yet. Don't bother me now, child. Go to the room where Juno sleeps and make yourself at home. When the ferrets take hold of the case we will have a time."

"What do you mean?" cried Muriel.

"What, haven't you heard? *Toby Sharp is dead!*"

"And who in the name of common sense is Toby Sharp?"

CHAPTER III.

THE WOMAN ON THE TRAIL.

A SMILE crossed Ravenclaw's face and the young girl, none the less mystified, waited for him to speak again.

"Though you have lived under the same roof that shelters Halliday Hood you may not have heard of Toby Sharp. Well, he is dead, at any rate, and I guess the case will get into the hands of the detectives."

"But why should we have 'a time' if it does?"

The long hand of the old man pushed Muriel away.

"Time enough for that, I say," said he. "Go to your room and Juno will come up presently. You are going to bring evil, even death, to this house, but I wouldn't turn you out for the world."

Muriel gave him a parting look and left the workshop; she passed back to the room where the child was sitting in a chair with her hands crossed like an old woman, and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"Show me the room, Juno, dear!"

A minute later the fair *protegee* of the Man in the Satin Mask found herself in a chamber which contained a bed and some articles of childish dress, and when the door had shut and she was alone she exclaimed:

"The mystery deepens. I have brought 'evil, even death,' to this house he said. In heaven's name, how can that be? I shall go mad if this life lasts much longer. He sent me off because the doctor told him his life was nearing its close, and he does not want me to look upon his face—the one he has kept hidden so long."

Meantime, Mercy Sharp, who had come away from the morgue, was threading the streets of Gotham on her way back to the office of Velvet Van, the detective.

She had missed him before, but hoped she would find him now, and when she went up the steps she heard voices beyond the door, which she opened without the ceremony of knocking.

There were two men in the room, one young and somewhat excited, and the other five-and-forty with a smooth face which looked full of cunning.

Mercy Sharp, with a slight cry, advanced at once toward the smooth-faced man and caught his eye.

The younger one looked at her, and then turned to the ferret with an inquiring glance.

"I have seen that man," said Mercy, when the door had closed on the retiring figure of the detective's caller.

"I don't know, for I believe you don't go out much. That is Oliver Ott, a young man who just now is solicitous concerning the welfare of a young lady, besides having on hand a little mystery of his own. I am glad to see you, Mrs. Sharp. You always recall the days of yore. How is your husband—"

Mercy interrupted Velvet Van.

"Is it possible that you don't know?" she cried. "I have just come from the morgue, where he lies dead and cold."

"Not Toby?"

"Toby. The body is there just as it was fished from the river late this afternoon. I was told where to find him on the street by a man with a scar on his forehead, as I could see when he lifted his hat to bid me good-night. I have come to you, Van Cue. You haven't forgotten that you once told me that if ever I got into trouble and wanted your help, I should come here?"

"I did tell you so, Mercy, but never thought you would come to me with such a story. Tell me all."

She told him all she knew, beginning with the man whom she saw drawing his boots on the stair, and following it up with her trip to the morgue, and the two men seen near it under the lamps.

"What did your husband do?" asked Velvet Van.

"I can hardly tell you. Three months ago he came home and said he had found new em-

ployment, but did not tell me what it was. Once in his sleep he got to talking in a strange manner, and he suddenly said:

"You may do what you please, but I did not hire to you to put my neck in the halter!"

"He said that as if he were talking to some one?" quietly asked Van Cue.

"Just as if he was having a tiff with his employer. I lay there all in a sweat of fear and heard him through; and when he got up the next morning, I begged him to throw up his job, but wouldn't tell him what made me so anxious."

"Did you ever try to find out what he was doing?"

Mrs. Sharp winced a little under this question. "I did once. I saw him on the street—it was just a week ago to-night—and I followed him without letting him know that I was out at an improper hour."

"Well?"

"I had not gone three squares when I was touched by a man and he looked down into my eyes like a snake and said: 'Go home, woman, and thank your stars that you get off so easily.'"

The detective looked at Mrs. Sharp for a minute and then went on:

"What was this man like?"

"I have described the man with the scar above his eyes. Well, it was the same person."

"This man has crossed your path several times, then. Are you sure the man you saw on the stairs last night was not he?"

"I am not sure of anything more than that he has a scar above his eyes. When I was here before the boy who stays here said you had gone to look at a floater and I thought at once that you had discovered my husband."

"I was looking at a young girl who was taken from the river and when I came back I found young Mr. Ott waiting for me. As yet, you have no proof that your husband was murdered?"

"But he was!" cried Mrs. Sharp. "That was no suicide, I am sure! Toby Sharp was killed because he would not do as he was ordered—that his sleep-talking, I think, proves. If you can't do anything for me—if you have other business on hand—don't take up my case." I must then become my own detective, for to hunt the scoundrels down is now my solemn duty."

"I gave you this hand when I made my pledge," he said. "I don't know what is in this matter, but I certainly shall investigate. The man with the scar means something and I am going to see what."

The sad woman's eyes lit up with joy, as she looked down into Velvet Van's resolute face.

"Don't get into danger on my account. Toby Sharp was not much of a man, as smart men go nowadays, but he was all the world to me, even if we had our little tiffs. If that man had not stopped me on the street that night I would have discovered what Toby really was doing, and maybe this case wouldn't be as dark as it now seems."

An hour later Mrs. Sharp was at home once more preparing for the reception of her husband's corpse.

With a firmness that savored of womanly bravery, she put the little house in order and never thought that all the time the light in her window was watched with much curiosity.

Velvet Van went direct to the morgue and gaining admittance, got a look at the body which lay on the slab preparatory to its removal home.

"It's a case of murder, so one of the surgeons says," the superintendent observed.

"Which one?"

"Dawson."

"Old Contrary, I believe you call him?"

"Yes. He generally objects, and about half the time he is right. The others say it is a case of drowning, and that the bruise on the back of the head came from striking a pier, after death."

"But Old Contrary thinks not?"

"He says he is willing to stake his reputation that the man was dead when thrown into the river."

Velvet Van turned once more to the body and studied the face for a little time. It was not a handsome face, for if Mercy Sharp had wedded for beauty she had got the worst of the bargain; but it was a strong face, telling that its possessor could say "No," and stick to the full meaning of the monosyllable.

He took a look at the clothes found on the dead man, and at everything discovered in the pockets.

The search for a clew of any kind seemed fruitless, and when Velvet Van crossed the front threshold of the grim dead-house, his face was the face of a Sphinx—inscrutable.

A sharp wind was blowing, and he caught the full force of it as he turned the nearest corner.

The figure of a woman flitted past him, and he saw it for a moment.

Half-way down the block it dodged into a hallway, and when the detective came up he noticed that the door stood ajar, and that just beyond it a pair of keen eyes were looking out at him.

Velvet Van went on, but not without a quick glance back.

A head protruded from the portal, and he made out the shape of a half-concealed face.

"Tracked, eh? It seems to me that this is very early in the game. I have been followed before, and by woman's tread. Ah, what is my night-bird going to do?"

The woman had quitted the house, and was coming after him with the noiseless tread of a creature of air.

She kept her face half-veiled, but saw him all the time, and when she had reached a certain distance she stopped and looked back.

The man-hunter did not slacken his pace, but continued to flit beneath the lamps. He was anxious to draw the woman on. He wanted a glimpse of the face she persisted in hiding.

Velvet Van had recourse to stratagem, and turning a corner, he stepped into an alley and waited.

Hugging the dark wall of the place where he had taken refuge, he listened for the footsteps of the creature at his heels.

She came on, but at the mouth of the alley checked herself, and to his surprise dodged into it and glided past him.

Velvet Van could have touched her if he had put out his hand, but she was gone in a moment, and he heard the opening and closing of a door; but, just where, he could not tell for the darkness.

The female tracker was at home, but where?

The woman who had shadowed him almost from the very door of the morgue was lost already, and he was in danger every moment of his stay in the alley.

But danger was nothing new to this man of steel-like nerves. He looked at the grim houses that opened upon the alley and even crept back and forth past them, but all to no purpose.

At last he went away, promising to return disguised during the daytime, for he believed that the finding of the woman was essential to getting clues to the case he had pledged himself to solve.

"I will put on the old dress and go to my new acquaintance," he muttered. "I can't say that I have made any astounding discovery there; but I am interested."

Detective Van Cue was alone in his little office, and the hour was very late. He had puzzled his brains over what he had seen since taking up the Toby Sharp mystery, and the steps that came to his door drew his attention.

Suddenly something white appeared on the sill of the door. An unseen hand was slipping a letter underneath.

Velvet Van waited a moment, then he crossed the room and picked up the missive.

One look at what he held in his hand and he threw open the door.

A figure vanished into the street and he started after it.

But, when he was midway on the flight he saw it come back, and the next instant the detective's vision was blinded by a revolver's flash.

CHAPTER IV.

PLAYING DOUBLE.

DETECTIVE VAN recoiled in the light of the flash, and for a second leaned against the wall like a man shot to the death.

The person who delivered the shot stood for half a second on the sidewalk and then ran off.

But the bullet, fired half at random, had sung its way past the detective's head, and he had felt the wind of it.

A narrower escape he had never had, but he was not disconcerted in the least. He went back to his room and drew forth the letter.

There were but two lines traced across the discolored paper, but they were significant.

"There is a power against which you will work in vain. Stop in time, if you would live."

There was no signature.

"I will not stop," the resolute man-hunter said aloud. "I am on this trail to remain there until the mystery is solved. I have never given up a trail when once struck, and I think I have a clue."

He was on the street again, and the lights and shadows of the pave alternately revealed and concealed him as he pushed along.

Velvet Van was a man of disguises, for when he reached the street, now, he was not the same person in appearance as Detective Van Cue.

He had gone back to his other self, and a few minutes after quitting the office he got out of a cab on a quiet street and rapped at the door of a well-to-do house to which he was at once admitted.

He was eagerly greeted by a man who filled a chair which had been wheeled to a small table, upon which lay a pack of cards.

This man was a good-looking person of fifty, who had very black eyes, and a handsome, sweeping mustache that fell over his mouth and effectually concealed it.

"And how is my friend, Colonel Orchid, tonight?" asked the man, who evidently had waited for the caller.

Velvet Van smiled. As "Colonel Orchid" he was known to this man in the chair, but as Velvet Van or Detective Van Cue he had never been introduced to him.

"I have been thinking of your story of the Man in the Satin Mask," said the ferret's friend, after a brief silence. "It reminds me somewhat of the Man in the Iron Mask. There must be a mystery connected with his whim."

"Some people say as much."

"Men don't hide their faces for nothing nowadays," and the man reached out a hand and picked up the cards.

As he shuffled them he looked up at the other and continued:

"I read nearly everything I come across, for I have nothing else to do. The most commonplace paragraphs in the papers seems to have a fascination for me. I saw one this afternoon which, if I was a detective, I would follow up."

"There was no reply."

"Here, I clipped it as you see. I am constantly doing this and will have a fine collection of clippings one of these days."

He opened a drawer in the table and took out a book which he opened at a certain place.

Velvet Van looked and saw that the paste was hardly dry on the paragraph giving an account of the finding and identification of Toby Sharp's body.

"I once knew a man by the name of Sharp," he went on. "He was a queer fellow, but not queer enough, I always thought, to go and drown himself."

"And is that why you would look into the matter if you were a detective?"

"Not altogether. You see, colonel, there is a part of my life of which you know little or nothing. I did not always live here shut up like a person dying of some disease. I once knew a man named Toby Sparp. He was an odd character."

"Odd in what way?"

"He lived a double life. In the first place he married a young girl and ran off from her two years after the wedding."

This was news to Van Cue who had never heard of such an event in the career of Mrs. Sharp's husband.

"There may have been two Toby Sharps," he said.

"I don't know. The one I knew afterward married a woman named Hansom, though she wasn't as beautiful as a rose."

"That is my Toby to a dot!" thought the ferret. "But, how did this man—Nate Nixon—ever come to know him?"

"Pshaw! let us play and let Toby Sharp solve his own mystery if the dead is capable of doing so," laughed the man with the pack, and his hands went on dealing the cards that fell fast upon the table.

It did not take the game long to warm up, and as it progressed the eyes of Nixon got a new light, and when he won the last little stake on the board he threw the deck across the room.

"Do you know a good detective?" he suddenly asked.

"I am acquainted with several."

"I ask you because I want a little work done. Could you bring one here?"

"It would be safest to send him."

"Just as you like. When can he come?"

"Set your time."

"You seem to be positive that he will work to my hour."

"I think I can promise you that he will."

Nixon thought a moment and seemed to make a note of time.

"I will tell you. It is about this Toby Sharp case. That man escaped from me once."

"How escaped from you?"

"It is a strange story and I prefer to tell it to the detective when he comes. There is a woman in the case and it goes beyond the mere death of the man found in the river. There is the beginning of a great case for a shrewd detective, but there is risk. Your man must be of the kind that don't shrink."

"He is of that sort."

Nixon seemed to turn pale and suddenly laid his hand on his heart.

"A good many people have it, eh, Orchid?" he smiled, looking at the man-hunter. "I inherited it from my ancestors, but there are causes that help it along. I have my time measured as surely as the man who awaits the drop of the sheriff's trap."

He had never gone thus far before. Though Velvet Van, as Colonel Orchid, had met him a score of times during the last three months, he had never referred to heart trouble, nor spoken of his past life.

All at once he sprung from the chair and crossed the room. His face grew red, and taking a vial of dark glass from a little cupboard which he opened in the wall, he held it to his lips a second. The effect was magical.

"I will be here in this room at ten to-morrow night," he said, coming back to the detective. "Tell your ferret to meet me here. Mind you, I want no man who fails. I hold in my possession the clue to the sudden death of the man called Toby Sharp."

"But the papers say that he was drowned."

"I know better."

Nixon spoke with decision and his hand struck the table by way of emphasis with the last word.

"That man was a hunted person for days before he died. He was a marked man when he was at home. He carried the secret that is worth more than all others. He was in the net long ago and I care not what the papers say."

The detective, hoping more would be said, was silent, but Nathan Nixon stopped where he was.

"Send me the best detective in New York. Send me a man who is all nerve. Send me one who, before he goes into the case ahead can hear without blanching that he is going to battle against a formidable foe—that if he fails he will disappear as silently as some men who never go back to their families and who are as dead today as Lazarus."

"At ten, you say?"

"At ten. I will be here if this accursed demon spares me," and he touched his bosom again.

"You must live, captain. I am interested in this matter and am willing to believe with you that the death of Toby Sharp covers a dark mystery which only a keen man-hunter can ferret out."

"And only the keenest of them all. At ten."

Nixon held out his hand and the detective bade him good-night.

"That's a start," said the man in the chair. "That is the first real move I have made against the Clan and I know what it means. I have made up my mind to fight it out the rest of the game. I know that I am the victim of the plot, that all the skill of all the doctors in the world cannot prolong my life a minute beyond the allotted time. What did one of the newspapers say about the one doctor who differed from the others who examined the corpse of poor Toby Sharp? He shook his head over the verdict. Doctors don't always agree. I shall ask my detective to discover this contrary doctor and maybe I can have a talk with him. But, Toby Sharp went out of the world against his will and he is going to stay out, much to the delight of the Gray Clan."

The speaker went back to the cupboard and picked up the little vial again.

This time he took a larger draught than before and seemed to hold it to his lips as if to remove it would be to cut short his life.

Instead of replacing it in the cupboard, he transferred it to an inner pocket and then buttoned his coat as if for a jaunt on the streets.

Almost at the same moment a cab drove up to the sidewalk; the door opened as Nate Nixon came out. He passed quickly over the pavement, and the next instant the cab rattled away.

It went up one street and down another; it was driven hard and at last disappeared under the arched entrance of a private doorway.

There among the dense shadows of the tall house the cab door opened again and the man got out.

Turning to the man on the box he said: "Tomorrow night at half-past nine, Clover," and vanished, while the cabman turned away.

If Velvet Van could have seen these proceedings what would he have thought? If he could have followed home the person he had visited as Colonel Orchid, a young Southerner who had plenty of money and plenty of time on his hands—if he could have shadowed him across the threshold of the house to which he had been driven, and seen him take from a shelf at a certain place a satin mask and in a second adjust it over his face, he would have thought that he was not the only person in Gotham who was playing double—that others besides himself could enact two roles at the same time.

Maybe the detective did know something of this. Maybe the cab had not rolled from street to street unnoticed, for when it vanished underneath the arch, a human figure glided from the shadows of the pavement trees and looked at the house.

"At ten to-morrow night?" this man said. "Your detective will be on hand, Captain Nixon!" and turning away, the man went down the street with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

That same man slept that night in Velvet Van's office.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOODWINK.

MERCY SHARP could not forget the man she had seen on the stairs in her own house and since the death of her husband he was uppermost in her mind.

She was almost convinced that the person was not Toby, but one of the people interested in his death, for she believed that he had been put out of the world by a murderous hand and that suicide in his case was out of the question.

Well, she had Velvet Van on the case; the friend of her girlhood days, now one of the best detectives, was at work and she felt that he would solve the mystery and bring to justice the hand that had taken her husband's life.

It was the same day of Toby's funeral and Mercy Sharp was back home after that sad event.

She was alone, the last neighbor having left her with the usual parting words of sympathy. The little room was dark and she could hear the rumble of the street as it came up the stairs to her ears.

All at once there came up the same steps a sound that startled her.

Mrs. Sharp turned toward the door, wondering who was coming and in a moment the steps stopped there.

At the first low rap the widow went across the room and opened the door.

A member of her own sex stood before her.

Mercy Sharp, looking curiously at the vail that hid the face of her caller, held open the door while she fell back for her to enter.

The strange woman glided into the room, but did not take the proffered chair.

"You are alone now, I believe?" she said in low tones which from the first sound singularly fascinated Mercy.

"I am, indeed, alone in the world. The grave has just closed over my poor—"

She was about to say "murdered husband," but checked her tongue in time.

"I have heard so. You don't know me, but I am here to offer you a home and one in which you may, in time, forget the grief that fills the heart just now and live down the sorrow of your life."

A new home for her and under this woman's roof?

"I cannot answer you, but the home I have is good enough for me and I may go back to the old place in Jersey and live there the rest of my days."

The veiled woman leaned toward Mrs. Sharp and the widow fancied that she could see a pair of glittering eyes underneath the vail.

"You don't know what lies before you," and a hand closed softly but firmly on Mercy's wrist. "You may be in danger."

"In danger?" and the speaker fell back and gave the hidden face a stare. "In Heaven's name, who would have anything against me now alone in the world?"

"There is no telling what might happen. Women as well as men may be marked and we don't know our enemies until they strike."

"I don't think Toby did."

"You don't think he did, eh? But, then, he drowned himself."

Mrs. Sharp could not keep back her secret.

"He did not! There, I have told you what I believe and maybe I shouldn't have done it. He didn't throw himself into the river and I don't care who knows it. There never was a drop of suicide blood in his veins and the person who says he drowned himself—"

She stopped suddenly and looked at the creature whose hand encircled her wrist.

"Well, if he was helped out of the world, why shouldn't you want another home?"

Mrs. Sharp was silent.

"But I don't know you. I never saw you before, and, then, I have neighbors who offered my head a shelter, but I declined, for this little place is good enough and here we lived without very much bickering till they found him in the river."

The gloved hand of the caller went to her face, but did not lift the vail.

"You don't know me? Ah, should that cause you to refuse an asylum? Let me breathe a secret in your ears. You are in danger. If as you say he was killed, why should not the same hand be lifted against you? I am one who knows more than tongue will impart now. But do what you think best, but in after times don't upbraid me for not saving you from the grip of the destroyer."

The hand fell from Mrs. Sharp's wrist, and the stranger recoiled.

"If you would only tell me something, I might—"

"You might change your mind, eh?"

"Yes."

"I have told you enough. The case lies in your hands; your own safety is there, as well. I come to you with a warning which you have seen fit to reject, and when the toils gather around you and you are deep in them, don't charge me with having thrown you into the danger."

The wife of Toby Sharp stood in the middle of the room looking at the person who had spoken.

"I will never come again. I am here for the first and last time. You have rejected my help; you may have friends, but they will not be powerful enough to shield you when the full danger threatens. The ordeal is near at hand—"

"In Heaven's name, who could have anything against me? Why was Toby Sharp hurried out of the world? He was harmless; he carried no secrets in his bosom that I did not know—"

"Are you sure of that, woman? What was his business? What kept him out sometimes till near morning? Did he ever tell you what his employment was?"

"I never questioned him."

"You did not? Did you ever follow him on the street to see what he was at?"

Mercy started.

This woman knew something; she knew that she had tracked her husband through the streets of New York; she must have followed her at the time.

"My God, you know everything!" cried Mrs. Sharp.

"Do I? And yet you refuse to take refuge in my house!"

A sudden fear seemed to take possession of the widow's heart. She appeared to realize that she was in deadly danger, that a shadow as dreadful as the one which had hunted Toby to his doom was at her heels, and thinking all of a sudden that she might communicate with Velvet Van as easily from the new refuge as from her own house, she said.

"I can't think of having at my heels the same hound that trailed my late husband. Such a thought would kill me in a short time. Where is your home?"

"It is not far from here."

"And I must go, when?"

"Not a minute is to be lost. I am here for you, and if I go back without you, the offer will never be renewed, and you will have to fight the Shadow alone."

"I cannot do that."

"Then you will go?"

"I will go."

Nothing but a fear which had taken possession of every faculty brought this answer from the frightened widow.

"Get ready."

"Is your carriage here?"

"We will find one on the street. I am not able to have one of my own."

Mercy had but little to pack up, and while packing it she did not recover her scattered senses. The veiled woman took a chair and watched her every move. The eyes that looked through the vail saw what she did, and when she stood before her with a small bundle in her hand and told her that she believed she was ready, the eyes appeared to glitter.

"I will drop one of the neighbors a note telling her what to do in my absence," said Mrs. Sharp.

"That will do. Wait."

The unknown woman went to the door and looked down the steps that terminated at the sidewalk.

When she turned round she beckoned to the little woman and the two went out.

If Mercy Sharp knew that she was quitting the old house for the last time she might have sent a farewell look about the room, but she thought nothing of the kind.

They reached the street seen by a figure half-buried in the nearest doorway, and when they moved off this same figure dodged into the hall just left and ran up the steps.

Mercy had locked the door behind her, but the nimble fingers of the man opened it.

In another moment he was in the room and had locked the door behind him. He was a good-looking fellow, with sinister eyes that seemed to see everything at a glance. His fingers were long and slender, and his movements quick as those of a cat.

Turning on the gas, he began to search the room, looking into every corner and paying some attention to every bit of furniture capable of holding anything.

But, nothing of importance seemed to reward his zeal.

"Curse it all, it ought to be here somewhere. Certain I am that it wasn't on his person and therefore the secret, if he committed it to paper, and he swore he did, ought to be here in this room."

Suddenly the man stopped and turned toward the door which opened into the hallway.

"It might have been a cat, for there are cats under this roof; I saw three the night I came and got caught on the stair; but the tread out there was too heavy for any but a human foot."

He slipped across the carpet toward the door where he listened with half-drawn revolver in his hand; but did not open the door to investigate.

He breathed hard while he listened, but at last, hearing nothing more, he ventured to look into the semi-darkened hall.

He saw nothing suspicious.

"Cat or man, the thing is gone, anyhow," he muttered. "I can go back to my search," and he did so, looking where he had not looked before, but with the same result.

"She may know. She was one of those women who always wanted to pry into everything. We must pump her, and if the secret is hers, or if she carried it away from this house, we will have it or know why not."

A minute later the man was on the street. He walked rapidly from Mercy's home and vanished.

Half an hour later he turned up beyond the door of a well-to-do house on a distant street and found a woman waiting for him in the parlor.

She was good looking, dark-faced, and perhaps on the shady side of forty.

"Well?" asked this woman.

"I found nothing."

"You searched the house well?"

"Nothing escaped me. Where is she?"

The woman smiled, and pointing toward the door, replied:

"In there."

"She walked right into the trap, didn't she?" grinned he.

"She didn't give me much trouble. She really believes that everything is square."

CHAPTER VI.

THE GRAY CLAN.

VELVET VAN was not unmindful of his promise to the man known as Nate Nixon. He had agreed to send him a first-class detective and that person was to be his own self.

Nixon knew him as Colonel Orchid, a character which he had been playing for some time, for Nixon had interested him, and besides finding him an agreeable companion, he was anxious to get at a secret which he believed the man possessed.

When the hour came for the meeting between Nixon and the detective the parlor in the quiet house was occupied and Nixon was waiting for the expected caller.

It was near ten when the door was opened and Velvet Van in his true garb walked into the room.

There were no traces of Colonel Orchid about him as he appeared to the person seated in the wide arm-chair, and Nixon scrutinized him with the eye of a man anxious to read his inmost thoughts.

The detective threw a card upon the table and Nixon picked it up.

"You are the gentleman my friend Colonel Orchid promised to send me?" he said, looking up into the ferret's face.

"I was told to come here—that you wanted to see me."

"I do," and the speaker waved the detective to a chair.

"The first thing a good detective learns is how to keep a secret," he went on.

"I think I have learned that art."

"I think so, too, from the look of you."

For a moment there was no further conversation, and then Nixon pulled a rope that hung from the ceiling near the table.

A face appeared at one of the doors.

"You can go now, Marble. Come in at eleven. I shall want you then."

Velvet Van got one look at the face. It was that of a young man, and set in the forehead were two queer-looking eyes whose light no casual glance could fathom.

"I keep one servant, and call him Marble," explained Nixon. "Some people keep too many, and where there are many ears you will find too many tongues."

"You are right. The less ears the fewer tongues."

"I sent for you because I have work for a man with a cool head; but, first, are you employed now?"

"I am at your service if you want me."

"That is good, and while you are not to serve me alone, for I am not the only person in the case I am going to talk about, you will not see the other people in the matter."

Nixon crossed the room and took a small vial from a little cupboard ingeniously set in the wall.

"We won't delay, for life is uncertain, and, then, I am eager to set you on one of the strangest trails you ever had. My name is Nathan Nixon. I was born under a tropic sun, and lived in the South till I reached my majority. But I will not weary you with an account of my life, for it has nothing to do with the matter in hand. Do I look like a man whose days are numbered?"

He bent forward and looked at the detective while he put the question.

"Do I look like one who knows that he is liable to die at any time, who feels in his veins at all times the workings of a subtle agent of death which all the skill of the learned can't check?"

"I would not call you the victim of any death-agent," Velvet Van remarked.

"Of course you would not, but I am such a victim, all the same. I am dying by inches, though I don't look it. There is a poison which kills as surely as the surest diseases that the medical fraternity have to deal with. Once injected into a person's system, there is no escape, and when it has been at work some time the span of the victim's life can be told by some of the skilled men of the present day. I am in the grip of a cable which is straining everything to sweep from its path more than one person. I know that what I am saying here in New York may seem incredible to you; but I am willing to bind every word with an oath."

"It is a detective's duty to believe a gentleman."

"Thanks. A few hours ago the body of a man was taken from the water by the harbor patrol. They took it to the morgue, where, I am informed, it was claimed by the wife, and that she has it now. This man was called Tobias Sharp, and was not much of a person as men go nowadays; but, all the same, he felt the hand of the Gray Clan."

"The same that you profess to be feeling now?"

"The very same. Toby Sharp did not feel the poison in his veins; he was simply killed in another manner, while I, who have not seen the

man for months, was marked for the secret death."

"But you knew Toby Sharp?"

Nixon started.

"I knew him," he said, deliberately. "That is, I have had some dealings with him, but not lately. There is at the head of the Gray Clan a woman whose hand is all-powerful and who is to be dreaded even by a cool-headed detective like yourself. She comes of stock that stops at nothing, and the nature of tiger and serpent are in her make-up. Years ago she was the wife of one who worshipped her, and but for one circumstance, she might not be a dreaded woman now. She can play the dove and at the same time be sharpening the claws of the tiger."

"An anomaly," said the other.

"Look at me. I know you wonder why I should fear this creature," and Nixon rose and stood before the detective, looking down upon him with glowing eyes. "I am strong; that is, I show no signs of mental or physical decay; but curse it all—Feel my pulse!"

He put his wrist down to Velvet Van and the detective put his finger on the pulse.

"Ninety-nine doctors out of every hundred would tell you that it beat regularly, but the hundredth one would shake his head," he went on. "That is how I feel. I haven't been myself since the fluid which kills first entered my body—but we will get away from this point. I want you to fight the Gray Clan for me, but when you enter upon the campaign you place yourself under suspicion and the hand that helped Toby Sharp out of the world will be turned against you. I want you to go into this matter with open eyes."

The Shadower bowed.

"This woman lives on a certain street and I am in possession of her number. You may think that very strange, but it is not so startling after all. Her accomplices—the other members of the Gray Clan—are not so well known to me. What is the object of the Clan?"

Nate Nixon laughed, and then bent over the table.

"What is the main object of every person? Money! The almighty dollar! But the Clan goes a little further. It has another object in view, or it would not have killed such a man as Toby Sharp of O—street. I knew its hand was at work as soon as I saw that the body of the old fellow had been found in the river. The Gray Clan is clearing its way, in the first place, to a million, and secondly it is after a secret which fell into the hands of old Toby in a singular manner and by accident. Toby Sharp had an employer; he found work some time ago and never told his wife what sort it was. Do you know Ramon Ravenclaw?"

"The little old man whose hammer is going all the time day and night in his house near the river?"

"I see you know him! That is the man. Well, Toby Sharp was in his employ. You look the least bit startled, Captain Cue; but what I am telling you is the truth. Toby Sharp was helping old Ramon when the blow fell that hurried him out of the world. The long pieces of steel that he hammers out on his anvil are the finest sort of watch springs in the market. No one else knows the secret of their making; but Toby did not ply the hammer. He was in other business and its nature wasn't of the sort which he desired to impart to his wife. Toby was trying to get into the Gray Clan."

"Into the league which is against you?"

"Yes. He may have entered it, I don't know, but his lips are silent now and what old Ramon knows he is not likely to tell. The Gray Clan, headed by the coolest headed woman that ever planned a crime, has me in its grip. I am as dead now in one sense as I will be when the coffin is screwed down over my face. Fight it personally? No! I know what I am doing. I must fight it through a man like yourself. I must get at its secrets, reach the names of its members and maybe, before I succumb to the agent of death, feel my hand at the throat of its creator and, dying, drag the Clan down to destruction!"

Nixon laughed as if he felt the victory in his grasp and smote the table with his hand.

"Here, this is where she lives. You smile at the name and address. I thought as much. You know her; you may have seen her as she drives out to the Park or rolls through the streets in her fine carriage. She the head of the Gray Clan? you ask yourself. As I live, that woman whose name you hold in your hand is the creature of the tiger claws and the serpent skin."

Velvet Van was looking at the name and half-wondering if he had not fallen into the hands of a madman.

"You must excuse me if I show signs of astonishment. We detectives are often surprised while following our calling, and to believe that this woman is the person you call her, is one of the surprises of my life."

Nixon was leaning back in his chair and his eyes were riveted on the man of many trails.

"You will proceed on the theory, ay, with the knowledge, that she is the queen of the Gray Clan," he said at last. "But for her Toby

Sharp would be alive now and still in old Ramon's employ. By her command he stepped out of the world, and I have had my days numbered. I don't think you will have much trouble tracking her down, for it is not many squares to her house; but that is not it. I want the whole method of the Clan unearthed. There is where the work and the danger lies. Let them suspect that you are on the trail—let this woman of crime and cunning suspicion that you have been to see me—and your life won't be worth the drop of an eyelash. You will not only be avenging the death of Toby Sharp, but you will be reaping new fame and unearthing one of the deepest cabals that ever plotted for a million in this city of wealth. There will be surprises all along the line; there will be some keen tracking for you and enough to keep your mind employed all the time. And when it is all over—when you stand at the end of your trail, if you ever do, there will be a fortune to be picked up. I have told you enough for tonight. I will be here every other night at ten. If you have anything to report, come to me. I send you off now with nothing but this. It is the best I can do."

One of Nixon's hands came up over the edge of the table and a tiny vial of blue glass was placed within reach of the detective's hand.

"What is that?" asked Velvet Van.

"The only antidote I believe that exists. Taken in time, I am convinced it will break the force of the terrible death-agent of the Gray Clan. Taken too late, it will not check the poison, but will keep life in the victim awhile longer than any other agent."

The detective pushed the vial away.

"I don't want it," he said. "I'm going into this case unarmed by any such agent."

"I admire your grit, but can't say as much for your judgment. You won't take the bottle, eh? The time may come—though I hope otherwise—when you would like to give your right arm for its contents," and the vial was swallowed up in Nixon's hand.

CHAPTER VII.

DREAM-STUFF.

THE detective went back to the little office, but did not tarry there.

"If this is to be the solving of two mysteries—one the death of Toby Sharp and the other the motive of the Gray Clan—why not begin at old Ramon's?"

The man who nearly always sat at the workbench under the same roof where we have seen Muriel sheltered, was plying the hammer when, at a touch, he looked up, to start at sight of the visitor—the Mystery-Shadower.

They had met before, but he did not know Velvet Van as a detective, and when the ferret looked down into the old man's intensely black eyes, he thought he saw a sudden shrinking there.

Ramon laid down his little hammer and wheeled on his stool.

"I am a Sphinx if you have come to me for anything," he at once declared.

"How do you know what I want?" asked the Shadower. "You must not suspect or accuse your fellow-creatures without proof."

The long fingers of the old man picked up one of his wonderful springs and bent it with a smile.

"I thought you were a human fox—one of those men who are hunting their fellow-men. Well?"

Velvet Van heard at that moment the voice of a child.

"That's Juno," explained Ramon, with a smile. "Would you like to see her?"

In a moment the door opened and Juno, the little girl, stood in the workshop.

She was pretty. There was something sylph-like in everything about her, and from the first Van Cue was caught by the lustrous eyes that looked from her intelligent face.

"No, she's not mine," said Ramon. "I don't have to tell you what I know. Come forward, Juno, and let the gentleman touch your hand. It is wonderful."

The girl approached the detective and put out her almost transparent hand.

The touch thrilled Velvet Van as he had not been thrilled by a hand for years.

"I don't know where she acquired her strange powers," said the old spring-maker.

"What are they?"

"What, haven't you heard? She writes in her sleep. See that black-board there?"

The ferret looked across the room and saw the black spot on the wall.

"You can't put her to sleep and get her to write," the old man went on. "I have had some of your what-you-call-'em at work on her. But it would not work. They can mesmerize her and do some odd things with her while in that state, but she won't write a line. I leave the black-board there all the time. When Juno is asleep she will come down here and write out her dreams. Queer, isn't it?"

Velvet Van was looking at the child whose big round eyes were regarding him with a strange fixedness.

"What do you do with what she leaves on the board?"

"Rub it out, mostly," was the answer. "It is queer stuff and sometimes she denies having written it."

"I guess I do write it, though," spoke Juno, with a smile. "I find it there in the morning, and, then, Papa Ramon would not fib for the world."

"Does she write every night?" queried Van.

"Whenever I dream and I guess that is nearly every night," answered Juno, for herself.

"And you stay up and watch her?"

"I work late, you see," was old Ramon's response. "She steals into the shop and the first thing I know she is yonder writing on the black-board."

With a farewell look at the detective the child, whose age was about fourteen, withdrew, leaving the men alone, and the moment the door shut the spring-maker opened a drawer in his work-bench.

"I'll show you some of the odd things she has written on the wall," he went on, taking from the drawer an old leather-bound book in which he had traced some sentences. "The man in the moon and a Philadelphia lawyer, if they put their heads together, could not tell the meaning of some of her dream-stuff. Here, look for yourself while I finish this spring."

Ramon went back to his work and the detective took the book from his hands.

Taking a stool in the light, he began to read what was traced on the pages.

Now and then he looked up at Ramon and saw the little hammer as it rose and fell on the steel which he was fashioning into a spring of great delicacy.

All at once he started, and glance at the old man as if he feared he had betrayed himself.

The words on the last page seemed to have grown into something readable as if out of the conglomeration before him the hand of fate had shaped some sort of destiny.

But the old spring-maker had not noticed him.

Slowly, watching Ramon half the time, the detective drew pencil and note-book from his pocket and began to transfer to it some of the words he had found on the page.

Ping, ping, ping went the hammer on the anvil.

Velvet Van wrote till he thought he had written enough, then he replaced the note-book in his pocket and spoke:

"It's queer stuff sure enough, Ramon," he remarked.

The little hammer stopped.

"Wouldn't you like to see her write?" he grinned. "You may if you will but drop in some time when she is asleep. There is one thing I have noticed and that is that her dreams are generally connected with what she has seen or heard during the day."

"Do you mean that if you would tell her about something startling she would dream about it and transfer her vision to the board?"

"You have caught the idea exactly. Sometimes I think—I don't know why—that you are a detective."

Velvet Van did not wince.

"I don't know whether you are or not, but I have nothing to tell you if you are," Ramon went on. "We were talking about Juno's gift. I told her the other night of a man who had been found in the river and the next morning I found the whole mystery cleared up on the board."

"And what did you do with it?"

"Rubbed it out," smiled the old spring-maker. "It was a remarkable thing, and if you did not know that Juno wrote it in her sleep, you would have thought that an eye-witness to the affair had made a confession in chalk."

"You should copy into your book everything the child writes. She may make plain something that will further the cause of justice and—"

The hammer nearly fell from old Ramon's hands.

"I don't want her to fall into the hands of the police!" cried he. "Don't you see that the moment I gave out something startling as written by Juno, the police would want to know what I am doing with such a child—I, old Ramon, the spring-maker? No, I don't give out anything she writes in her sleep. I'm no fool!"

Detective Van Cue thought it about time to come to the mission that had brought him to the den, and leaning toward the spring-maker, he lowered his voice and said:

"Did old Toby serve you faithfully, Ramon?"

In an instant the countenance of the old man underwent a change.

It was white, and he fell back a pace, looking into the immobile face of the man-hunter as if a sudden revelation had been made by his words.

"I guess you belong to the hunters," he said. "I don't know why I have had strange thoughts of you since you have been here, but you have unmasked yourself."

"Do you think so?"

"I am almost sure of it now. Come, don't tell Juno anything or she might come down some night and leave on the board something that would injure your calling."

There was no reply for a full minute. The visitor was waiting for the spring-maker to get over his flurry, and when he picked up the hammer he remarked:

"Whoever I am, I don't see why a reference to Toby Sharp should unnerve you. You are not afraid of the dead, are you, Ramon?"

"It's not that; but I wasn't looking for a question of the kind, and you see the dead man about whom Juno wrote on the wall was that same Toby Sharp."

"I thought so."

"By Jove, you knew it."

"Just as you like, Ramon."

The brown hand of the old man came up, and was laid softly on the detective's wrist.

"I told her it would come to this. I said that when the detectives got hold of the case, we would have to look out. And you are the first one to take hold of it."

He looked nervously toward the door beyond which Juno had vanished.

"Do you live alone with Juno, here?" asked Velvet Van.

"Why shouldn't I? The child needs some protection, especially since a few have discovered her strange gift, and though I'm old, I think I can protect her. So you knew that the man found in the river—Toby Sharp—came here sometimes? He did. He was here the night before they fished him from the water. A queer fellow, that man, and if you detectives knew everything, there would be an unmasking of lives that would astonish some people. Why, Toby carried in his heart some of the queerest secrets you ever heard of, but when they pulled him from the tide, he wasn't in a condition to divulge a single one."

"Certainly not."

"I've thought sometimes of putting Juno on the trail with her faculty. You see I could tell her what I know and let her dream out the rest. Wouldn't that be a scheme? Ha, ha."

"It might not prove a bad one."

"Risky! risky!" laughed the old spring-maker. "Can't think of it—yet."

There was hope in his tones, but Van did not pursue the subject.

He sat opposite a window which was curtained. The folds of the dull cambric fell to the very bottom of the sash; but he noticed that in the goods at a certain spot near the center was a slit as long as a man's hand.

Slowly that slit began to widen, as if some agency was opening it for a purpose.

He could not conceive how a hand could work it if a glass was between the curtain and the outer shutter. But the slit widened a little, the opening was almost imperceptible, and none but a detective's eye could have detected it.

Velvet Van was careful how he looked toward the window. He glanced at it through his long lashes, and when he leaned toward old Ramon he threw a swift look at the opening, and saw there an eye that seemed to look him through.

It was a human eye, possessing the penetration of an eagle's, and so near the curtain was it that he could see that it was as black as rayless midnight.

"On the watch!" thought the ferret. "Is that the eye of the Gray Clan?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EYE THAT WATCHED.

THE eye at the window continued to watch the occupants of the room for some time, though it seemed to pay most attention to the detective.

It left the window almost suddenly, and as it vanished the old spring-maker said:

"We will let Juno write for us some of these nights. She will dream about whatever you describe to her before she goes to bed. She falls into a strange sleep, and I have seen her write when her eyes were wide open, though, in fact, she was sound asleep."

"I will come to-morrow night, Ramon. Will you let me tell Juno what I like?"

"You shall."

The ferret was eager to throw himself upon the trail of the eye spy, and as soon as possible, so he bade the spring-maker good-night.

He had no sooner quitted the place than old Ramon ran from the work-shop and opened the stair-door leading to Juno's room.

"I will tell her something now," said he. "She will be sure to dream about it, and I will stay up and wait for her to put her dream down on the black-board."

With the tread of a cat he found his way chamber, the door of which he opened without noise.

"You can't come in here!" said a voice, at sound of which he stopped.

"Why not, girl?" and leaning forward he beheld the tall figure of Muriel standing in the dim light that prevailed.

There was a flash in the girl's eyes, and old Ramon looked at her with a half smile on his face.

"I want to see Juno."

"The child is asleep."

"Yes, yes."

"She isn't dreaming now, and you must not disturb her."

"What is the girl to you?" cried the old man.

"I have fallen in love with her already."

"You? Why, you don't know what kind of blood she has in her veins."

"It matters not. At any rate it is as good as that which circulates through the veins of others I know," scornfully replied Muriel. "Hands off!"

Old Ravenclaw was seized by the determined girl and forced back.

"By heavens! this is unwonted authority and in this house!" he exclaimed.

He looked across the room and saw the form of Juno lying on the couch in one corner.

"You are going to get her to write for you. That is it. Don't you know that this faculty is exhausting her—sapping her very life, as it were?"

"I can't help it."

"You can't help it, eh? Why haven't you tried to break her of it?"

The old man laughed.

"What did I tell you, not long ago?" he demanded.

"About what?"

"Toby Sharp. I said that when the detectives took hold of the case we would be in hot water. Well, they have taken hold of it."

"Was the man who just left the house a detective?"

"He was."

"And is he looking into the death of Toby Sharp?"

"Yes."

"Well, how can that concern me?"

Ramon Ravenclaw seemed to recoil.

"You will know more than you do if you live through this play," he declared.

"Through what play?"

"Where is your head, girl? Didn't the man called Halliday Hood—he of the Satin Mask—tell you that the time had come for you to quit his house and seek an asylum elsewhere? In fortune's name, why don't you go to dreaming like Juno, and ferret out in your sleep some of the scenes with which your life is connected?"

"You know something about them?"

"So I do, so I do," muttered the old spring-maker. "If you are not going to let me talk with Juno, I will go back, but she will dream and then I will see her write on the board."

He laughed as he turned away, and Muriel watched him as he glided from the room.

Old Ramon returned to the workshop, and opened the draw where he kept the memoranda of the child's dream-writing.

"Where is it?" he cried, looking into the drawer with eyes that seemed on the eve of popping from his head. "I let the detective read it and saw him put it back."

He looked everywhere for the book, but it was not to be found, and with a white face he shut the drawer and sat rigid for a moment.

"I will get Juno to track it down for me. I will tell her that a book was stolen from this drawer, and she will dream it out for me. I wonder if they did take Toby into the Clan—if they did initiate him into the mysteries of the dark order? And how is the man in the mask?"

He grimaced as he asked the last question, but it was the grimace of a devil.

If he had looked at the slit in the curtain he might have seen that another eye was on guard. He might have ferreted out an orb that appeared to look him through, for it was black and piercing and he was under espionage.

Gradually the eye left the window, and its owner crept through the shadows of a great city to a house which stood in an alley.

A door opened and a woman stood in the light that prevailed in a small room and the face of a person of past thirty was shown.

She stood for a moment in the middle of the room, watching a door on one side until it swung inward and another woman appeared.

"Report," said the last comer, tall and, while not handsome, distinguished-looking with a figure of regal mold.

"I watched at the window."

"And you saw what? Did the child come down and write on the wall?"

"Not while I watched. She was in the room, but wide awake."

"Ha, with old Ramon?"

"With the old man and another."

"A customer?"

"A man-hunter."

The eager questioner started.

"A detective?" she cried and her hand clutched the spy's arm and drew her forward.

"Go on! What was this spy, this ferret, like? Tell me everything now. Don't omit anything you saw or heard."

"Everything shall be told," and within the next ten minutes everything was.

The taller of the two listened without a word. She seemed to hang breathless on the sentences of the female spy and until the last word was spoken she did not stir.

"You must go back every night. To-morrow night the detective is to come back. He is to give the child a clue and she will go to dreaming. Both he and old Ravenclaw will wait for her in the workshop and she will transfer her dreams to the blackboard. You shall be there. The window must give you all the information; ah, you must use your eyes to-morrow night as you never used them before."

There was no reply. The eyes of the woman thus commanded sought the floor at her feet.

The other noticed it.

"Do you refuse?" she cried.

"I have never disobeyed."

"That is true. To-morrow night nothing must escape you, I say. You know too much for me to tell you anything."

"I know enough."

"Then, fail me not."

The female spy went out. She glided from the house and sought the street.

"In the toils of a serpent that can crush one at will!" she said. "Have I lost all courage? Am I bound to this accursed Clan till I lose all hopes of Heaven? I know that it takes but a leap, and that when they pick one out of the river the Clan cannot harm him."

She turned into a street that led to the piers and was almost running forward when she was arrested by a sudden grasp and falling back with a sharp cry, she looked into the grinning face of a man.

"Which way, Spira?" he said.

A shudder and silence.

"Come with me. I have something to show you."

She went back without a word.

The man who was rather good looking, but with a scar above his eyes like the person seen on several occasions by Mercy Sharp, led her to a poorly furnished room on the second floor of a house some squares from the pier and kicked two chairs into positions near a table.

"What do you think of this?" he went on, tossing upon the table the old book which old Ramon had missed.

"Where did you get that?" cried the woman.

"I get some things in strange places. You recognize it, then?"

"I can't help doing so. I saw it to-night."

"Where were you?"

The eye of the speaker was piercing and his mien terrifying.

"Where were you, I ask?"

"At the window," stammered the woman.

With a laugh the man began to turn the leaves of the book until he reached the transcriptions of little Juno's dream-writing.

"A wonderful child, that," he was heard to mutter. "Worth her weight in gold. Possesses the same powers that her mother possessed when a girl."

No answer.

"Here; read what the old man has written," and the book was pushed toward the pale-faced creature. "Here is the story of the end of the Tobias Sharp."

"But I don't want to read it!" almost screamed the other, shrinking from his gaze.

"You don't eh? But you must! and what is more, when you have read it, I have a proposition to make. You know what I am doing now—that I am living under the same roof with one of the living mysteries of New York. I see as much of the Man in the Satin Mask as any one. He is followed when he knows it not. I am at his elbow nearly all the time. He had a doctor to see him—one of these learned men who can gauge human existence. It was amusing. I saw the whole interview. I laughed in my sleeve, of course."

The listener did not speak.

"What, aren't you going to read what the child wrote in a trance?"

"I can't—I can't!—Spare me this. If you will not, I will go to the river and leave the Clan in the toils."

He dropped the book; he bent over the table with a demon in his eye, and the woman, leaping to her feet, confronted him with a knife!

CHAPTER IX.

A DESPERATE WOMAN.

"You don't want to show too much spirit," grinned the man as he went forward, looking at the desperate woman. "You are in the toils of the Clan as much as any one, and the moment you attempt to free yourself you are liable to get into deeper water."

"I know that, but you must not force me to do that which I will never do."

"I merely asked you to read what the girl wrote in one of her strange trances."

"And I have told you that I will not read it."

She spoke with spirit and he saw that the fingers were wound about the handle of the keen-edged knife, and that she would not read what he had held in her face.

"Well, you will not be asked again," he said at last, going back to the table. "I will read it for you."

"You will do nothing of the kind," and she laid her hand on the door knob and tried to open it.

"You have locked it. I might have known it," she said, turning upon him.

"It is locked."

For a moment longer she looked at him and then came forward eying him like a hawk.

Taking a seat at the table, she looked across it and sullenly waited for his next move.

Instead of forcing her to hear a reading from the book he held, he suddenly put it away and said:

"You can go, but remember! You are watched all the time. You know the code."

"I am no traitress."

"I have not accused you of being one; but you will not seek the river, for the hand of the Clan will follow you even there and you would not succeed in your design."

There was no reply. She waited till the door had been unlocked, when she stepped into the hall and thence to the street.

Looking back, she beheld the eyes of the man riveted upon her, and before she started off she heard him say:

"Do what you are told to do. You belong body and soul to the Clan, and to disobey will subject you to the sentence of the Order."

Away went the woman called Spira, and looking back now and then to see if she was followed, she discovered a dark figure hovering on her track.

"He is keeping his word. I have the grim shadow at my heels now. Must I submit to it?"

She dodged into a dark spot near a tall building, and deliberately drew her knife.

There she waited like a tigress ready to spring and listening all the time to the footsteps of the spy.

Nearer and nearer came the person on the walk to the point of the woman's knife.

At length it stopped and she ventured to look at the maker of the tread.

"Heavens!" cried the woman.

The tracker was standing near a lamp-post and the light was for a moment falling upon his figure.

The woman in her eagerness leaned forward and looked at him.

She saw that he had taken something from his pocket and that he was looking at it in the light of the blaze.

"That is the man who was with old Ramon!" she said under her breath. "That is the detective."

The man under the light was Velvet Van.

"The hand that clutched the knife dropped at its owner's side and her look changed."

"What would he give me for what I know?" she asked herself. "That is the man to whom I could sell for an enormous sum the secrets I hold. I could go to him and tell him how to strike a trail which would cover him with glory, provided he escaped to tell the story of the hunt. Ay, there is the rub!"

She continued to watch the ferret till he started on again and once more approached her.

Spira drew back into the darkest shadow at hand and eyed him.

Instead of reaching forth her hand and detaining him she let him pass, and when he had gone by, with a sudden impulse she threw herself upon his track and followed.

Velvet Van did not know that he had a secret keeper at his heels.

He did not dream that near him at that moment was a creature who could have divulged the story of the deepest and most damnable plot ever hatched in the brain of man, and that, dogging him up one street and down another, was a woman who was to give him a good deal of trouble.

Spira followed the detective to his little office. She saw him climb upward to the door and leaning into the hallway below heard him open it and enter.

"I know where he hides now. I know where to find this man who was at old Ramon's. He will be there to-morrow night. He is to tell the child something that will bring into play her magic powers, and she is to dream for him and Ramon."

She seemed to linger at the open hallway as if she wanted to go up to the ferret's door, yet feared to do so.

Minutes slipped by and twenty passed before she moved.

When she crept from the spot she went silently down the street with her head half covered, nor stopped until she reached a door which she opened with a pass-key.

Was Spira at home?

She had scarcely gained an upper room when she turned toward the door and started back with a light cry.

The man who faced her an hour before stood before her.

He had a grin on his face and when he came toward her secretly laughing at the fright he had caused, she fell back to the wall for the first time unnerved.

If she thought of the knife her hand did not seek it. If she felt that the presence of the man in the house was dangerous to her, she made no resistance.

"I am the bearer of a command," said the man.

There was no answer.

"I have here an order from the Head of the Clan," and he took from his bosom a bit of paper for which the woman without speaking held out her hand.

When she had it she went toward the light and read it.

Her lips seemed to twitch, but she did not lose color.

"You will obey?" said the man.

"I know the Code."

"You will lose no time. It is getting late and you where she is. It was your duty to keep track of her and Rene says you know."

The uplifted hand of the woman pointed toward the door and the man was gone.

For a moment she stood in the middle of the chamber, then with a cry she fell forward and sunk at the foot of a little couch.

"Once theirs, always theirs!" she exclaimed. "I have sold myself body and soul to the Gray Clan. I am in the toils and what I am commanded to do I must do or—"

She checked herself as if some one had entered the room, but she was alone.

"It was worse than death. Long ago I lost the fear of death, but it is the other torture that chills me and makes a coward of one over whom death has no terrors. I know where she is. That is true. I kept my word with the Clan. I told Rene the Dreaded that I would not let her escape and I have not. I can go to her and I must. The time has come for the crowning act of the plot. I am the person who is to carry it out. It was the man—Gold Button—who suggested me. It was the wretch who followed me to-night who made me the agent of the last act of the Clan."

She arose and took from a drawer a knife not so heavy as the one she had carried until then.

Hiding it in a pocket of her gown she selected other things from different places in the room and with a look which had the semblance of a farewell glance she went down the stairs and out into the night.

There was now in the eyes of the woman a look of desperation. She flitted from street to street and kept on until she was again in the neighborhood of old Ramon's den.

Once more her eye appeared at the slit in the curtain and she beheld the spring-maker at work at his little bench.

Ping, ping, ping went the hammer.

By and by the face of Spira, the spy of the Clan, vanished, and she went around to the rear of the house.

Raising a sash there she crept into the place, and found her way to the stairs that ran up alongside the den where the old man worked.

At a door overhead she stopped and listened.

"Are both of them in there?" she asked herself. "I wonder if the child is Muriel's bed-fellow."

She drew back so suddenly that she almost shrieked and the door swung open and left her face to face with the child.

Juno, with eyes apparently wide open, came into the hall and went to the top of the stairs.

Spira hugged the wall and gazed.

"Everything is playing into my hand. I wish it was not so. I would to Heaven that the room was empty and that I would not find there the woman who came to this house from the home of the Man in the Satin Mask."

The sleep-walker was on the topmost step when a figure in white rushed from the room and grasped her.

It was Muriel.

"You sha'n't go down there and write out your dream for that old man," cried the young woman, as she drew Juno back from the steps.

The child did not resist, and Muriel drew her back into the room, where Spira saw her replace her on the couch.

"Thanks," said the spy in the hall. "I am glad this happened. I am in the grip of the Clan and came hither for a dark purpose. Kiss her to sleep again, Muriel, and wish that you were as young as she and not the marked beauty of the Gray Clan."

It did not take Muriel long to get back Juno to the slumber she had had broken by the scene in the hallway, and when the child was sound asleep once more the figure of Muriel stole toward the half-open door and entered the corridor.

"What a chance for me!" muttered Spira. "Here she is separated from the child and the ready victim for the sacrifice."

Muriel was listening at the steps, leaning over them in her eagerness, and Spira heard her breathings in the silence of the moment.

"Clan or no Clan, I can't do it," she cried. "I will dare the infamous Order. More than that, I will go to the ferret I tracked home and he shall know all!"

Muriel heard none of this. She went back into the room and closed the door.

The agent of the Clan stood awhile longer among the shadows and then went down the steps.

Five minutes later she was on the street again. She went almost direct to the home of the silent shadower.

Climbing the stairs to Van's room, she knocked and waited.

There was no reply, and though she knocked again she was met by the same silence.

"I will come again," she said. "I will hide from the Clan. I am now against it. I will not do what I was commanded to do. Others must take that mission. She looked too innocent. Let Gold Button do it."

She did not go back home, but crept into another house in another part of the city, and took lodgings where they were to be had for a small sum.

Despite the excitement of the night, she fell asleep.

She awoke with the sun in her face, and went out.

On the same block, with his eyes on the alert, watched a man who saw her the moment she emerged from the building.

Regarding her like a snake watches the victim its charms, the man waited for her to come up.

Spira came on without an effort to escape.

"You know the penalty," whispered the man.

"I know, but I dare the Clan."

"You, woman?"

"I dare you all! The bonds are broken!" and before he could speak again she had turned, and with a parting look which told him that the most desperate of creatures had just spoken, was walking off, her hand seeming to clutch something among the folds of her dress.

CHAPTER X.

IN BLACK AND WHITE.

TWICE during the day that followed his visit to Ramon Ravenclaw's, Velvet Van, the ferret, called at Mrs. Sharp's home, but did not find her in.

One of the neighbors told him that she had gone off with another woman, and had left no letter behind.

The body of Toby had been consigned to an humble spot of ground, where the poorer classes slept, and the lone widow was absent.

Night was again near at hand, and the detective was thinking of his engagement with old Ramon, who had said that when he came again he should be treated to a specimen of little Juno's dream-work.

He was anxious to see what the child could do in this strange line, and he had, besides, a certain object in view.

As Colonel Orchid and Velvet Van, he was Nathan Nixon's friend and detective, and had promised to take the trail of the Gray Clan, the terrible Order into whose clutches Nixon said he had fallen.

The address furnished by the man in the toils had been looked into, and Velvet Van had discovered it to be the home of a woman known to the outside world as Norah Blake.

She was reputed to be a widow of wealth, and what little was known of her was of the best, though somewhat mysterious.

Mrs. Blake inhabited a house which gave outward signs of the wealth of its tenant. She could be seen any fine day in the Park, in one of the richest turnouts that frequented that noted place, and her carriage was driven by a man who sat on the box like a dandy.

This woman, the Queen of the Gray Clan?

Such a thing was at first thought impossible, and we have seen with what surprise the detective received the news from Nixon, the victim.

But, during the last ten hours, he had looked a little into the life of Mrs. Blake; that is, he discovered that there was not much of it which could be looked into.

He could look at the mansion; he had seen her in the Park and on the streets, but he was yet to learn that what others said about her had some foundation of truth, and that the trail he was about to strike would lead him to strange places and imperil his life as it had never been imperiled before.

"After the seance at old Ramon's I will devote more time to the other part of the game," murmured the detective, as he turned into the street where the old spring-maker lived.

Night had come once more. The lamps of the city were all ablaze and he reached the old house to hear the ping, ping of the steel hammer as Ramon plied it on the tiny bits of metal.

He found Ramon with a frown on his face, one which had not left it since the theft of the memorandum-book, and the first words he said were in reference to the loss.

"I know you didn't take it, but it vanished, all the same," he remarked. "It left that drawer, and when my back was turned for a second. There was a spy in the house last night."

"A spy for whom, and for what?"

"Ah, that is it! You shall have a good deal to look into before you quit the trail of the hand that took Toby Sharp's life. Did you see the widow and get what she knows?"

"Mercy Sharp has disappeared."

Old Ramon looked astonished.

"For good, eh?"

"Who can say? She has vanished as effectually as if the pavement opened and swallowed her. But, let her go. I will find her when she is needed."

Ramon shook his head.

"You may, but I doubt it. Now that I know you for one of these man-hunters, and have no doubt of your ability, I must say that when you want Mercy Sharp she will not be there. Some one else will stand in her place."

"You know a good deal, Ramon, and something that you will not talk about. We know that Toby Sharp was in your employ when he died so mysteriously. Do you think he joined the Clan?"

Ramon Ravenclaw started at this question as he had started at a similar one, and for a moment looked steadily at the ferret.

"You have come to test Juno. The child is ready."

He touched a button in the wall over his work-bench, and the door opened to admit the wonderful child.

She smiled the moment she saw the detective. "This gentleman has a story to tell you," said old Ramon as Juno dropped into a chair and turned her large black eyes upon the man of trails. "You will listen to him and then go to bed."

"I am listening."

Velvet Van began at once, but not without a glance toward the slit in the curtain; but this time he saw no eye there.

He went over the ground of Toby Sharp's death; he told Juno how the body had been found in the river and taken to the morgue. He talked about the bruise on the back of the head, that it could not have been made by a pier after death, and finally drew an imaginary picture of a murder after dark, and the carrying of the victim's body to the river, where it had been left to the waves.

To all of this the child listened without a motion. Old Ramon appeared interested in the narrative, and there was still another person who was hearing it all.

This was Muriel, leaning against the door that led into the hall. She had followed Juno to the door, and taken up her station there.

"In mercy's name what does all this mean?" she said under her breath. "That the man in there is a detective, there remains no doubt. I must not let him know that I am here, and Ramon seems to be keeping the secret from him. He said I was concerned in the solving of the mystery which envelops Tobias Sharp's death; but how? I am the ward of the Man in the Satin Mask. He sent me off in order that I should not lift the mask after his death and look into his face."

She heard the last of the detective's narrative, and before Juno could quit the room and discover her, she had bounded up the steps and was safe in the little chamber she occupied.

There she waited for the child to come.

"I am going to see the end of this," she thought. "I have never witnessed a proof of the child's skill, and this is my chance. I will not prevent her from dreaming. She shall dream all she pleases, and I will reap some of the reward."

Juno fell asleep, and Muriel watched her in the solitude of the chamber.

An hour passed with barely a movement on the dreamer's part.

At the end of that time Juno began to toss nervously on the cot, and then left it slowly.

"The time has come," said Muriel, gliding after her.

The child went down to the workshop and crept into the old den.

Muriel, halting on the steps, leaned toward the glassless transom over the door and looked down into the room.

The blackboard was directly in the line of vision.

She saw a smile pass between the detective and the old spring-maker when the child came in, her lustrous eyes wide open, though she saw not.

She saw Juno approach the blackboard with something white between thumb and finger, and the next moment the little wonder was writing thereon.

Muriel in her eagerness to catch the letters as they fell from the end of the child's white pencil, leaned over the balustrade and looked as she had never looked before.

Old Ramon and Velvet Van were watching the child with the same attention, and the fingers moving over the board were not lost sight of for a moment.

"It is wonderful!" said the shadower. "She is finishing the story I told her. She is actually telling all about the death of Toby Sharp."

"Wait," and the dark hand of the old spring-maker closed on the detective's wrist as if he thought he was about to go forward and stop the moving hand. "She will tell more, for I told her something before you came in."

"About what?"

"Never mind. See! She has finished the dream which came from the tale you imparted. Now she will take up mine. She has strange store-houses in her brain, the child has. Watch her!"

The chalk had drawn a line across the blackboard as if separating what she had written from what she was about to write.

Muriel on the steps seemed to feel a cold sweat stealing over her.

"What is that?" cried old Ramon, and he was leaning over Juno's shoulder with his eyes appearing to stand out from his head. "In the name of God, what is she writing on the board now?"

"You will waken her and break the spell," warned the detective.

"She sha'n't go on! I did not tell her what I knew to get her to dream out a terrible secret."

The hand of Ramon darted forward; the moving chalk was arrested in the middle of a word and the child wonder was jerked back.

The excitement that controlled the old man was intense.

The detective who had lost nothing of what had been traced on the blackboard; saw beneath that she had dreamt out for him these words:

"The Man in the Satin Mask drove her from home that she might not lift the mask when he was dead and see that he was the same person who murdered—"

In another instant the hand of old Ramon sweeping across the board, blotted from existence the words the child had just written, leaving only those which she had traced for the man of trails.

"I will kill you if you dream any more that way!" hissed Ramon, holding the now aroused and thoroughly frightened Juno at arm's length. "I don't care if they hang me for it the next day. Go back to bed and break yourself of the habit of lying in chalk when you are asleep. I won't have it here in this house."

He pushed her toward the door and the little one would have fallen if the hand of the alert detective had not caught her.

"You can't blame the child," he said, looking reprovingly at the irate spring-maker. "You put her on the trail by your own confession."

"Go!" cried the old man to Juno. "Go back to bed and don't dream any more to-night."

Velvet Van opened the door and led the little one into the hall.

When he came back she had climbed the stairs and was once more in Muriel's arms where she was trembling and sobbing as if her young heart would break.

"What makes them tell me such things if they don't want me to dream about them?" she asked. "Why don't he lock the door and not let me in the workshop if I am not to dream any more? I can't help it. He tells me stories about people and I must go down to him in my sleep and write out what I dream about them."

Ten minutes later Juno was asleep and Muriel had locked the door so she could not get out if she should get up with the intention of going below with the chalk in her hands.

Then she fell to watching the child.

Meantime Velvet Van had taken down the writing left on the blackboard and bidden old Ramon good-night.

"It was a success. I discovered more than I looked for. That broken sentence is the most important one of them all. The Man in the Satin Mask is into this mystery. I thought so before, but Juno the dream-writer has confirmed it. I will know why old Ramon cut off that sentence. I will know, too, what has become of the girl who left Halliday Hood's home—the beauty, Muriel, whose disappearance is giving Oliver Ott so much concern."

If he had but looked over the transom and up the steps he might have solved one of the mysteries connected with the case; but Muriel had avoided him, and he was not aware that at that very moment she was one of the tenants of old Ramon's house.

Velvet Van looked over his notes in the solitude of his little room.

He read in them the story of the death of Toby Sharp; he had followed Juno's hand while it traced on the blackboard the events of one eventful night, and he was satisfied that from a dream had come the story of how Mercy Sharp had been made a widow.

When he got up and had placed the paper under lock and key he went down upon the streets.

It was not very late.

A boy sliding up to him touched him on the hand and extended a bit of paper.

"That makes me a quarter," said the lad as he vanished.

Velvet Van unfolded the note in the light of the nearest lamp.

It contained but one word and over it was a dagger roughly drawn with pen and ink.

The one word was—"Remember!"

The detective looked up and smiled. At that moment no one was near him, but he thought he saw the grinning face of a boy across the street, and when he moved off he crushed the paper in his pocket and it seemed to burn his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

GOLD BUTTON'S CUNNING.

THE man called Gold Button by Spira was the same person seen by Muriel in the library the night she bade adieu to Halliday Hood's house and took refuge with old Ramon, the spring-maker.

He had been some time in the employ of the Man in the Satin Mask, and, while trusted to a degree which the young girl feared was not for her guardian's good, he was a menace to her happiness and she sometimes thought him a spy under the roof which had sheltered her from childhood.

Muriel often wondered what mystery was connected with her first years, for she knew, or thought, at least, that she was not the child of the Satin Mask.

More than once she had caught Halliday Hood regarding her in secret, and whenever she in any way seemed to infringe on the mystery she was silenced quickly, or the conversation was changed.

The Man in the Mask was a strange person.

Never had she gazed upon the face he took such pains to conceal.

More than once she had tried to catch a sight of that face, but every time she had been baffled and she would not have consulted the private secretary for the world.

If Spira knew him as Gold Button, she called him Talbot. It was the name by which he was known to Hood, and Talbot was all the one he answered to while in the house.

If Spira had followed this man after he met her on the street the morning after her stay in the lodging-house, she would have seen him enter Halliday Hood's house.

Talbot, or Gold Button, went direct to the library and taking a seat at the desk, he usually occupied, began to write.

He was the only occupant of the handsome room.

Now and then a smile would steal across his face and looking up at his reflection in a mirror opposite the desk, he would regard himself for a moment.

There was just above Talbot's eyes a scar which, while it did not destroy any of his good looks, was a disfigurement.

It had been there a long time and he had never tried to hide it.

We recollect that the man seen by Mercy Sharp on the street when on her way to the morgue had just such a scar, and if she could have entered the library while Talbot was at work, she might have been startled by the scar that shone—for it did shine—in Gold Button's forehead.

Gold Button wrote until he heard the opening of a door without turning his head, but by looking in the mirror, he knew that the wearer of the satin mask had entered.

The eyes that shone behind the domino regarded Talbot for a few seconds and then the soft footstep of their owner came forward.

Halliday Hood dropped into a chair at Talbot's side and said in quick tones.

"Make out a check for five thousand."

The private secretary started a little and took up a pen.

Holding it in his hand poised above the check-book, he glanced at the Satin Mask for instructions.

All at once the Mystery threw one hand to his heart and fell back in his chair.

"Not now. Let me recover a moment and then you shall have the order."

He arose like a person in a hurried search for air, crossed the room, and while watched by the keen eyes of Gold Button, lifted one hand to his lips and swallowed something.

"I don't think it's much use," said the inward soul of Talbot as he eyed the Mystery like a hawk. "The jig is nearly up, and from now on the descent will be rapid."

At that moment Hood turned as if he had heard the secretary and came back.

"A man with his time measured ought to be able to meet death with firmness. We will try again."

Once more he was leaning toward the man at the desk and the ink was ready on the pen.

"I must postpone this little matter of business," he said with an effort. "There is no hurry."

"You might leave a written memoranda," said Gold Button, but he was met by a shake of the head.

Once more the Man in the Satin Mask left his seat.

His eyes seemed to bulge from his head; the veins on his hands stood out like whipcords, and Gold Button, glancing down at them, could not suppress a sinister smile.

The door had barely closed upon the figure of Halliday Hood ere Talbot snatched a bit of paper from the desk and scrawled a few lines thereon.

Sealing it in an envelope, he hid it in his coat and went out.

At the first letter-box around the corner he dropped it out of sight and came back.

Halliday Hood was reclining in his arm-chair and a cloud of smoke was circling above his head.

Talbot saw this as he passed on through the library, but did not go in for orders.

Suddenly the Man in the Satin Mask threw the cigar into the fireless grate and stood erect.

He had become as cautious as his cunning secretary, for he looked into the library and then climbed the broad step of the stair.

At the top of the house was a room which no one but himself was permitted to enter.

He carried the key and the lock was a peculiar one, too "peculiar" even for the ingenuity of Gold Button.

But the moment Talbot heard Halliday Hood on the stair he left the desk.

He climbed the steps, but did not stop at the door of the forbidden chamber.

Instead he went to his own room which was on the same floor and shut the door behind him.

Touching a button in the wall, he opened a door which no person would have found.

He stood in a little room scarcely large enough for himself.

All was dark as Erebus about him.

Groping his way across the chamber, he reached another wall which he felt till he found a button similar to the one he had touched in the first apartment and a second door opened.

He was now in a room totally devoid of furniture, but he was satisfied.

Here he struck a noiseless match and the little flame shooting up revealed a lamp which he lighted.

The eyes of Gold Button had the gleam of the serpent's.

In a little while he was leaning against the wall face foremost, and one of his eyes seemed to be glued to the plastering.

He was looking into a room beyond the one he occupied.

More than this, he was looking into a chamber which was tenanted, and by no less a person than the Man in the Satin Mask.

The face was not hidden now.

Halliday Hood stood in the room with a mirror before him. He held it before him and was gazing into its depths.

"Watching the strides of the conqueror!" grinned the spy to himself. "He has taken off the mask he wears to the world and is watching the track of the dread destroyer."

Then he fell to looking at the Mystery as he consulted the glass with his teeth shut hard and lines of doubt in his face.

"All the skill of the skilled can't break the hold of the monster," Talbot went on. "You are as sure to die within the time set by Doctor Jagger as I am to profit by your taking off. You may take your 'antidote,' but it will not save the life caught in the coils of the Gray Clan. The girl is gone, but she will not be hard to find. Spira failed to do her duty last night and says she intends to tell 'all' to the man of trails; but we don't fear her."

He watched Hood until he readjusted the mask, when he drew back from the wall and slipping down to the room was at the desk as if nothing had happened when the Mystery came back to his chair.

It was not the first time Talbot, the spy of the Clan, had followed his master to that little room and gazed upon the face which he scrupulously hid from the world.

He was the only person in that house who had looked upon the unmasked face of the man of mystery. He knew what lay beneath the satin domino; he knew how the eyes had sunk into the depths of the forehead, how the hair had grown gray, and how the hands had become eagle-like claws, all under the spell of the secret agent which no skill could arrest.

Halliday Hood came back to his room and called for Gold Button.

Talbot came in, pen in hand, and waited for orders.

"Ten thousand dollars to Clover," said Hood. Gold Button started.

"To have and to hold so long as he lives—"

"What is it you want done? Is it to be your will?"

The Man in the Satin Mask seemed to spring forward.

"What did I say?" he asked.

"Nothing that amounted to anything."

"But you asked me if I was making my will. It is made. I have prepared for the end."

A strange look took possession of Gold Button's face. It was evident that what had just been said was in the nature of a revelation.

"Go back. I must have been dreaming," said the hidden face. "I am not myself to-day anyhow—curse this strange disease which even the great Jagger could not arrest!"

"A will? That is news," said Talbot, going back to his work. "A will by the man in the grip of the Clan? I must know more; I must see this document. Is it here, or at the other house? No matter. We must see it."

Half an hour later the masked face in the elegant room was thrown back in the chair and Halliday Hood seemed to have fallen into a lethargic slumber from which it would have been difficult to have roused him.

Gold Button entered the room. He moved about like a cat; he looked everywhere.

Finding nothing there, he leaned over the sleeper and took from his pocket a bunch of keys with which he slipped from the chamber and climbed the steps.

He gained the door of the mysterious room and opened it.

In he went, shutting the narrow portal behind him.

There was a square outlined on one of the walls and approaching it the sharp eyes of Gold Button caught sight of a button which he touched.

The door that opened revealed a small niche which seemed to be filled with papers.

Eagerly the hand of Gold Button darted forward and clutched the pile.

Drawing it forth he began to look through the lot when a cry escaped his lips.

"Great God! this is a find worth its weight

in diamonds. This is more than I bargained for."

He looked some time when he replaced the papers and turned to the door.

He touched the knob, turned it, but the portal would not open.

"Is this room a trap?" he cried, cold sweat coming out on his forehead. "If I am left here the Gray Clan fails."

Again and again he tried the door, but it was as immovable as a rock.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COOL DETECTIVE.

MEANTIME the Man in the Satin Mask slept in the room below.

When he came out of the slumber which was deep and sound, he discovered that he had passed many hours in a state of unconsciousness, for there were long shadows on the streets and the shades of another night were near at hand.

Starting from his chair he sprung into the library and found it empty.

Talbot was not to be seen, and after looking at what he had last written at the desk, the Mystery went back.

"I don't need him," he said. "I won't need any one much longer, but I am fighting them all."

Some time afterward he looked at his watch, and as the rumble of wheels fell upon his ears he slipped from the house and sprung into a carriage.

This man was living a double life. If he was Halliday Hood at one place, in another he was quite a different person. There was a spot where he discarded the satin mask and where he sat and looked into human faces without so much as a single attempt at concealment.

In the "other place" he took a chair at a table and went through a pile of papers.

There as "Nathan Nixon," the man who had employed Velvet Van not only to track down the slayers of Toby Sharp, but to combat the dread Gray Clan, he was more at his ease, though he acknowledged that his life was measured and that he knew about how long he had to live.

Several days had passed since the body of the man, Toby, had been fished from the river by the harbor patrol.

What had Velvet Van done, and would he be there that night with a report?

The eye of Nixon was going through one of the papers when he suddenly paused.

He had caught sight of something that would not have arrested the attention of one in a thousand, but it had a fascination for him.

"PERSONAL:—If the person who can give any information of M. S., widow of the late T. S., he will confer a favor on 'Information—this office.'"

A singular smile passed over the reader's face. He read the "personal" again and even the third time before he laid the paper down.

"What has become of Mercy, anyhow?" he said aloud. "This evidently conveys the information that she has vanished and some one wants to know where she is. Is this my man? Did Velvet Van, as they call him, cause that notice to appear in the paper? And if Mrs. S. has disappeared, why should she put off so soon after Toby's death?"

He had the last words on his lips when the door opened and he looked up into the face of his detective.

"Here's a go, and if it isn't some of your work you will have to look out," he laughed. "The widow has vanished."

Velvet Van took the paper and looked coolly at the notice.

"Is that your work?" asked Nixon.

The detective shook his head.

"Strange, isn't it?"

Velvet Van looked down over the paper, but said nothing.

"That woman should not get out of the way yet," remarked the sometimes wearer of the satin mask.

"But this would lead one to believe that she has vanished."

"It must be true."

"It is true."

"Ha, you know, then?"

"I happen to know. Mercy Sharp, wife of Tobias Sharp, is out of our reach."

Nixon seemed to wince as if the news was most displeasing.

The detective leaned over the table and laid his hands upon the edge of it.

"I am on the trail," he said, noting the effect of every word upon his single auditor. "I have had several surprises."

"Then you have learned something of the Head of the Clan?"

"Something."

"I own that it is pretty hard to learn anything there as she knows how to hide her trails."

"If she is the woman you think her—"

"She is!" and the hand of Nixon came down upon the table. "She is the Queen of the Gray Clan. They call her Mrs. Blake, but she lives two lives. She—"

He stopped and looked at the detective.

"I have made a queer discovery, and that is that we may be on the wrong trail after all."

"You can't be if you follow her," cried the man in the chair. "I know you will not fail if you keep track of her and the other people she has drawn about her."

"What is her motive? What is the mission of the Gray Clan?"

"My death, for one thing."

"Is that all?"

"Heavens! isn't that enough?" grinned Nixon.

"Enough for you to know, perhaps; but you must remember that I may have to know more!"

"The Gray Clan killed Toby Sharp."

"Granted; but why should it turn its attention to a man of his calling? The poor wretch died penniless."

"I know that. He may have been poor in purse, but rich in secrets. You understand me?"

The ferret nodded.

"There is a man who may be drawn into this matter, and if he is, the case will get darker from the start."

Nixon did not wince now, but was as calm as if discussing a simple proposition.

"Who is that person?" he asked.

"Some men call him the Man in the Satin Mask."

The long hands of Nixon seemed to shake at the edge of the table, but only for a moment.

"I have heard of this person," he said. "I guess every resident of Gotham knows or thinks they know that he exists."

"Don't you think he does?"

"Why, yes, of course I do. He must have an existence since so many people have talked about him. So he is to come into the hunt for the murderers of Toby Sharp?"

"It looks that way."

The man of the double life took a long breath.

"I can't see how he can get into the hunt, but you are a detective and have been on the trail. You may know more about this matter than I do."

The ferret smiled a bit; he could not help it, for he knew that the man before him was playing as cool a hand as he had ever seen played by any one.

"This man being in the game, I must see him," he said. "I can't get along without it. I must make the acquaintance of Halliday Hood, the Man in the Satin Mask. I must see him soon."

The watchful eyes beneath the human tracker seemed to get a malicious gleam, but it did not last.

Nixon leaned back again and took a long breath.

He looked for a moment like a man driven into a corner, but he came out of the ordeal with his mind made up.

"You shall see Halliday Hood," he said. "You shall have all the help you need on this hunt for justice and vengeance."

"I must see him soon."

"You shall."

"You know him, then?"

"I know him."

A smile was forming again at the man's mouth.

"I must see the man in the Satin Mask to-night."

"You shall be gratified. I am that man!"

The last four words were uttered with a deliberateness that savored of stern resolution.

The lips of the speaker came together behind the last one and he continued to look up into the detective's eye.

"What, you Halliday Hood, the Man in the Satin Mask?" cried Velvet Van.

"I am that man. I am the person about whom one-half of this city has gossiped. You need not go beyond this room to talk with the Man in the Satin Mask. Go on."

The detective played his hand well. He not only suspected that the man in the chair was the Mystery of the Avenue, but he knew that he would not have to quit that room to look into the eyes of Halliday Hood.

"So I am to be drawn into the hunt?"

"Why not? If you are the Mystery and 'Nixon' at the same time, are you not the poisoned victim of the Clan?"

The long hands shut.

"The poisoned victim of the Gray Clan! That is right. I am that person."

"Then, why did you send Muriel forth into the world and why was a life taken?"

The broken sentence which Juno, the dream-child, had traced on the black-board seemed to stand once more before the detective.

The effect of his words upon the Mystery's face was magical and startling.

It grew white and seemed to shrink away.

"You are in the fight to the finish. So am I. You want me to track down the Gray Clan and to bring to light the hand that took the life of Toby Sharp. I am going to stop short of nothing else. I intend to hunt down not only the head of this infamous league, but the rest of the band. I will not let anything but eternal justice guide eye and hand in this matter. I have taken an oath to ferret out the darkness of his murder. I shall begin at the beginning. I don't care who it hurts, or who it spares. I am

the friend of the wronged and the innocent in this case. You are Halliday Hood, the Man in the Satin Mask; but you will find your secret kept as long as the keeping of it does not interfere with justice."

The man who listened to these words did not move until the last one had been spoken.

He saw no mercy in the eyes that glittered above him.

"But you will hunt the Clan for me?" he said at last.

"I will hunt it down as against the innocent. I will destroy it or be destroyed myself, but not in the interest of the guilty. That it exists I have now no doubt; that it is your enemy I am sure; that you are its victim I am equally certain."

"And knowing all this, you will break its infernal power and bring to light the crimes of its mistress?"

"What crimes?"

The Man of Mystery quailed before the ferret of the city of secrets.

"What crimes?" he echoed. "Hunt her down and you will not have to ask me such a question. Throttle the Gray Clan and all will be made clear. But if you drag me into the game—if you expose where you could save—you will live to curse the day you took hold of this matter."

There was a threat in every word that fell from the lips of the man in the chair.

"The die is cast and I will not recede," said the ferret. "I will spare no one."

"All right. But be warned in time. The sting of a dying serpent is as deadly as the poison of a healthy one. You know me under two names. You may serve me as Nixon; if you fight me as the Man in the Satin Mask, you will lose more than the game."

The answer was a look as cool as coolness itself.

CHAPTER XIII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

A DESPERATE woman was the creature called Spira.

She realized, after parting with the man on the street, that she was to be outlawed by the Gray Clan, and that if she did not take immediate measures for protecting herself, she would perish at its hands.

That she knew some of the dread secrets of the Order there was no doubt, and with them in her heart she resolved to carry out her resolution, and tell all to the detective whom she had tracked to his office.

But first she went home. She slipped up the narrow stair, and glided into the little room, where she knew she was not safe from the vengeance of the league she had quitted.

The failure to carry out the order of the Clan in the house of the old spring-maker would subject her to the death prescribed in the secret code, and knowing this, she began to prepare for the worst.

Desperate beyond description was the creature whose eye had witnessed the interview between the detective and old Ramon.

Spira, disguised, but not safe even then from the spies of the Clan, crept across the city and ran up the detective's steps.

It was broad daylight; she had resolved not to wait till night to carry out her purpose, and when she knocked at Velvet Van's door and received no response, she fell back with a sigh.

She had failed again!

As she reached the sidewalk the rattle of a carriage as it was driven past startled her and looking up she recoiled with a cry.

On the back seat of the vehicle, her face turned toward the building she had just left, sat a woman who was clad in the height of fashion.

"Tis she!—the dreaded head of the Clan," exclaimed Spira, looking after the carriage. "In God's name did she notice me?"

She leaned out of the hallway and looked after the flitting carriage. She saw the woman for the last time as it was whisked around the corner by the spirited horses, and then stood pale and silent for another minute.

If it was merely a coincidence it was a significant one and Spira did not get over it for some time.

Once more on the street, she hardly knew what to do.

There might be spies on her track. The man from whom she had fled with a threat might be nearer than she thought and the scar in the forehead might be gleaming for her.

But she went on and on until she reached once more the room she occupied.

On a table lay a note and this startled her again for she remembered having locked the door.

With trembling hands she picked it up and opened it.

Spira glanced at the writing that confronted her and sunk breathless into a chair.

"This is a summons to death!" she cried. "I won't go!"

She looked up as if she expected to see the executioner at the door, but no one was there.

Crossing the apartment, she locked the portal and went back with the note in her hand.

"I won't take back my defiance. I will stand

to what I have said. But they must find the victim before they kill him; she must find me—the cool tigress with the evil eye!"

An hour passed and Spira came not down the steps.

The dark-faced man on guard across the street grew tired of watching and crossed the stones.

He looked up at Spira's windows and then dodged into the hall.

"She shall be hurried up," he said. "I have waited on her ladyship long enough and she must know that no one can trifle with the Clan."

This person had no scar above his eyes, but he was a man with the agility of the cat and the strength of the tiger.

Spira's door was locked, but after awhile he opened it with a key and walked in.

The woman was gone!

There were abundant evidences of flight everywhere about the chamber, but the person he sought had vanished and he stood there a little while between a curse and a smile.

"Outwitted, but not for long. Nothing escapes us. We find the traitress as well as the doomed enemy."

He searched the room, but found nothing worth carrying away and then betook himself off.

Spira had simply slipped from the house by the back exit and was far from the place.

This time she was cool and nothing indicated that she was flying for life from the dagger of the Gray Clan which had such a person as the Man in the Satin Mask in its toils.

She turned up in another part of the city and to a person whose face lost color the moment she was seen.

Spira shut the door and walked forward, looking at this person who was a cripple, for he occupied a chair made for one of his kind.

"I didn't tell you to come," growled the man, who was past fifty and not at all good looking.

"Of course you did not, but under the circumstances I knew nowhere else to go."

"There are lots of places for women of your ilk. For instance, there's the river which takes all that comes to it, and, then, there is the prison—"

"Go on," said Spira, through clinched teeth. "Don't stop from any motives of delicacy. I am ready to listen to anything and you needn't think that I will try to stop that tongue of yours."

"You couldn't stop it if you were to try."

"That is right, Sam Patch."

The cripple sat a moment longer, looking at her and all at once a gleam of pity seemed to light up his eyes.

"I guess you can stay, for you would not come to my hovel unless you were in danger."

Spira drew from her pocket the note she had found on the table of her room and handed it to him.

He read it with a smile.

"You will find the little room overhead ready for you. I don't want you to think hard of me for the way I've just talked. You are a hunted woman."

"Hunted, but still a hunter myself," said Spira with bitterness.

"You can't get out of the clutches of this league unless you tell some good detective all, and even then the story might cost you your life."

"I know that. I will take the room, but I won't promise to remain there all the time."

She went to the apartment overhead and put it in order. When she had finished she came down-stairs with a new light in her eyes.

The cripple had not moved.

"Look here, Sam. I told you once that I wouldn't come back to you unless I had to."

"Yes."

"Mother used to tell us when we were children at her knee that evil would pursue us some time, but we thought it was a figment of fancy, for she had much trouble, you know, and would weep at times."

"Well, evil has pursued us," said the cripple.

"Look at me."

He glanced down at his misshapen limbs and touched them, half angered, with his crippled hands.

"Do you remember the man who came to our house once and whose appearance there threw mother into a swoon?"

"The man I wanted to hunt down afterward and mother would not let me out of fear?"

"The same man."

"Well, what makes you recall that time now?" Spira leaned toward the man in the chair and lowered her voice:

"He lives yet."

"That man? Prove it, Spira, as they call you now, and I know my legs will straighten out and I will be myself once more."

"That is impossible. He lives and is in the toils of this infamous Clan which has owned me for years."

The cripple drew back and glared at her.

"When did you find all this out?" he asked.

"I have known it for some time."

"The Old Harry you have! and you have kept the knowledge from me?"

"I thought it best, for you see I was under

oath, but now I have risked everything and thrown the oath to the winds. That man is in the grip of the Clan. He has been touched by its hand and his days are numbered."

"Thank Heaven for that anyway!" cried the cripple. "His days are numbered you say. That is the best news I have heard for many a day. I have thought of him a thousand times and always with hatred. He came to our home and drove mother mad. And you have seen him? You have helped to send him along the highway to death?"

There was no reply, and Spira turned her face away.

"Sam, we are the children of one who had her trials, and we have lived to experience the correctness of her prophecy. We have been drawn into the toils. You have suffered at the hands of a villainous doctor, who took delight in transforming you into a cripple, and I have helped the Gray Clan."

"Yes, Spira."

"I am going to undo something now. I am going to tell all to the man-hunters of New York."

"You mean that you have resolved to betray the Clan?"

"Call it treason, for that's what it is."

"I love you because we are of the same flesh and bone. You can run the streets and track down the worker of our ruin, but I have to remain here like a spider in his den and wait for the fly to come, ha, ha."

"The fly won't come here, that is certain. He is totally unaware of your existence. The Man in the Satin Mask does not know that you sit here day and night and wonder what ever became of him."

"That is right, Spira. But in the name of God, aren't we to get even some day?"

"Some day," echoed the woman.

"Let it be soon."

Spira looked at him a little longer, and then touched his arm with one of her fingers.

"Toby Sharp will help us to vengeance," she said.

"What, old Toby, the man who used to call on us and look so wise, and all the time we said he didn't know anything?"

The woman nodded.

"What's become of old Toby?"

"He's dead."

The look of the cripple became a stare.

"He was murdered by the Clan!"

"Ha! Killed by the league which you have been serving? Look out, Spira; there is more than one rope in this city."

Spira tossed her head and smiled.

"I know what I am doing. Toby Sharp is dead, but he will help us to vengeance. What is more, his widow has already disappeared. Then, the head of the Clan rides about in her carriage—I saw her awhile ago—and waits for the deadly work of her agent which cannot be detected, not even by the skilled men of science."

"Poison, eh, girl?" grinned the cripple.

No answer.

"And you are going to fight them all?" he went on. "Do you mean to tell me that you can baffle the Gray Clan—you, a hunted traitress? Don't you know that you are in the toils more than ever?"

"I know what I am doing."

"Then, success attend you. So Toby Sharp is dead—murdered, and the Man in the Satin Mask has the death-agent of the Clan in his veins? Pray, what is the name of the man-hunter who is to unearth all this mystery with your assistance?"

Spira whispered the name of the detective.

"He is taking big risks," smiled the cripple.

"He will need nerve."

"I think he has it."

"If he hasn't, God help him!"

Spira arose and went to the window. Looking down upon the street, she stood there awhile, watched curiously by the man in the cripple's chair.

He seemed to pity her.

"I shall find him this time," she said, suddenly turning upon him.

"Be careful!"

She held out her hand and bent half lovingly over him.

"Good-by, Dan," she said. "I will come back in spite of this cabal of secret crime. I will have told Velvet Van all before we meet again," and stepping back, she looked at him once more and sprung from the room.

"What a cool woman she has got to be," muttered the deformed. "I never thought she would play a hand like this. Gods! I wish I had power to help her; but I am to die like a chained dog where I am."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MARKED FERRET.

If Spira saw the carriage of the head of the Gray Clan dash through the streets of New York, it was seen by another person, who was unaware that the desperate woman, outlawed by the secret cabal, had gazed upon it and its occupant.

The detective was in another part of the city when the woman known as Norah Blake stepped

from the rig and entered the mansion she occupied.

Entering the house, she went direct to the parlor, where she came face to face with a man who sat in one of the plush-armed chairs whose rollers were bidden in the rich soft carpet.

"I am back," smiled the woman, looking at the man, who was not at all handsome, though he had a fine figure which was the abode of courage and strength.

"So I see. I have been here some time, but am not wearied."

"Well, how goes the fight?"

The woman had thrown off her wraps and stood before him, looking down into his eyes.

"The blow was not struck."

"I know that. Does Spira think to turn against us?"

"She has vanished."

"You mean that she is trying to escape; you must not forget that no one ever escapes from the Gray Clan."

"You are right. No one has escaped us yet."

Norah turned to the table and picked up a card case which lay there.

Twirling it in her soft hands, she smiled at the man before her.

"I saw the house awhile ago. I looked at the window where Gold Button says he sometimes sits and looks out upon the world fading surely from his sight. He is going down faster than ever now. He is alone with the exception of the watch we have placed over him. You know where the girl has hidden. She thinks herself safe because she has gone to old Ramon's, but she is no safer there than was Toby Sharp in his out-of-the-way home."

"Of course she is not. We will get her even though Spira had not the courage we expected of her."

"This old wretch who hammers out watchsprings and does it so well that he makes a living at it, is possessed of a good deal of fatal knowledge. He has a ward who dreams out mysteries and writes them on a black-board which he has prepared for that purpose."

"I have heard of the child-wonder."

"I would like to see her."

"You?"

"Why not? I want to say that she is dangerous to us if she can really do this. What if she should write for some detective?"

"I thought the Gray Clan was not afraid of the man-hunters of New York?"

There was sarcasm in the voice to which the woman listened.

"It is not," she shut her teeth hard. "It is not afraid of these men who unravel mysteries, but for all I would like to see this wonderful child. I wonder of Spira ever saw her at work? She has had her eye at the window."

There was no reply.

At that moment the sounds of the bell went through the house and Norah, the Queen of the Gray Clan, turned toward the hall.

The next second she moved into the corridor and the man left in the parlor waited for her return with some impatience.

She came back with a man at her heels.

"This is Mr. Carter," she said, waving her hand at the tenant of the parlor and at the same time giving him a look which he understood.

The man with Norah was rather tall and well built. He looked very commonplace though well-dressed, but in the depth of his eyes was a light which meant more than it told.

Carter made a movement toward quitting the parlor and was not molested.

Walking into the hall he turned to the right and slipped into an adjoining apartment.

Springing to the wall the moment he reached this room, he drew aside a picture hanging there and put his eye to the papering.

Meantime Norah was addressing her visitor.

"I am simply Mrs. Blake and cannot be the lady you seek," she said. "There are scores of Blakes on the Directory and some one else must be the legatee of the Donald Blake who, as you inform me, died the other week in England."

"But you came from England, did you not?"

"Yes, but without 'expectations,'" was the reply.

The caller rose to go.

"If you care to leave your card," she said, following him toward the door, "I will keep it for reference, and if I ever need your services, you shall be called upon with promptness."

The man who had told her he was a hunter of heirs handed her a neatly engraved card which informed her that he was to be found at a certain place, and stepped into the hall.

In another moment he was bowed out and Norah hastening back to the parlor met there the man who skipped from the room on the stranger's appearance.

"Why didn't you throttle him? You were in the next room," she cried. "What are your hands for? I stood him with his back to you expecting you to make a leap and have him in your clutches before he could say 'Jack Robinson,' but here you did not stir. Were you afraid of him?"

Carter looked at her with alarm and surprise.

"Who was he?" he stammered.

"What is he? you should ask. That man is the most dangerous detective in the city—that is Velvet Van!"

"Impossible—"

She interrupted him with a laugh.

"He is none other. An heir hunter forsooth. I knew him the moment he entered the parlor and I thought I had signaled you that an enemy was in the house. You caught my look?"

"I did, but—"

"Let it pass! He came here for business. That is the man we have to look after. We have him on the trail at this very moment. He is more dangerous than a dozen traitors. That ferret is the black card in the deck. He is the man who is hunting down the death of the man who was found in the river; I tell you that we have to look after him and the hand of the Clan must not spare."

"It shall not!" cried Carter. "I know him now."

"He will not be an heir hunter very long. It was only a card of his own playing. To-morrow he will be some one else."

The man stood up and seized his hat, but the hand of Norah detained him.

"You look after the girl first," she said. "Give this detective over to me."

"To you?"

"Why not? Do you think that Mrs. Norah Blake cannot play a hand against a ferret like him? I am the Head of the Clan and I know what is to be done."

"It beats me; I confess it. I would have given my hopes of paradise to have known that that man was the ferret on the trail."

"I don't doubt it, but we must to work at once. Sit down."

Carter dropped back into the chair.

Norah strode to a desk which she unlocked and relieved of a tiny packet which she brought to the table.

Opening it, she revealed a small vial which she placed before the observant Carter.

"Gold Button needs this," she said. "He reports that everything is moving along nicely, but with this detective at work things must get along faster. You will take this to Gold Button."

She handed the bottle to Carter who, holding it up in the light, looked at it with a smile.

"There's a good deal in that vial," he said.

"There are twenty deaths!" was the answer.

"I wouldn't have the Clan against me for the world."

"I should say not. Another man has it against him now. This detective is the doomed victim of the league from this moment. We will turn on him at the right time."

"It should be soon."

"It will be almost immediately. The fool lost his life by the move he has just made."

"How came you to recognize him?"

"By an accident, I confess. A year ago I met him, but not as Mrs. Blake. He has forgotten the lady who had her pocket picked on Fifth avenue for then I was not Norah of the Clan, but simply Lucy Wingship of another thoroughfare. I knew him the moment he came in and from that second he was a doomed man."

Carter had transferred the vial to an inner pocket and was near the door.

"Get it to Gold Button as soon as possible. You know how," she went on. "Tell him about the wolf on the trail, but say that we will take care of him."

"I won't forget."

"Having taken the vial to Gold Button, you will go back after the traitress. She can't escape you. Spira will hide, but you will find her. She may go to the cripple. Look for her there. You know where the man in the cripple's chair sits out the days and nights?"

"I have seen him."

"Spira may go to him, I say. There seems no other hiding-place for her."

"What if the ferret should track me?"

"I need give you no instructions on that subject. You have a head of your own. But you are not to go out of your way to deal with Velvet Van. I will attend to this ferret-sharp of the city. I want something to do besides riding about in my carriage and, while showing myself as Norah Blake, wait for the poison of the tropics to finish its work in the house of the Satin Mask."

Half a minute later Norah, the Head of the Gray Clan, was alone in the mansion on the avenue, and the man she had dismissed was creeping down an alley like a criminal looking for a covert.

"I am glad some one has taken up the trail," she said, looking at her full length reflection in the mirror that adorned one side of the room. "I want this very ferret to fight. I know of no other one who is half so dangerous. I found him out the time I employed him as Lucy Wingship, and said to myself if ever I had a man against me, I wanted it to be this one, for kill him and you will be safe. Carter will find Spira. He will look everywhere for the woman who failed to carry out the mission which took her to old Ramon's house. He will find her at the den of the cripple, who is her brother. He must stick to the trail till he has

finished Spira, the spy. I want to see the dream-child of whom I have heard so much. I know something about her ancestry. I know why Spira shuddered when I told her to go and watch the child and to read what she wrote on the black-board. Ha! the woman has a heart, if she has been the sworn spy of the Gray Clan."

She crossed the room and looked into a little drawer which she unlocked.

"It is still there, and will remain where it is till it is needed, if ever it is. So the Satin Mask is nearing the confines of the unknown? He sent for a skilled doctor, who measured his days for him. He tells Gold Button that he will soon give up the ghost, and he knows that the Gray Clan is at his heels, that its merciless hand is at his throat. Ha, ha! when we have succeeded, when the last stumbling block is out of our way, we will lay our hands on the million, and there will be none to tell the story of the coolest game ever played against man for gold."

At this moment, in a little room in the house occupied by Halliday Hood, a man was leaning hard against a door and his eyes were starting from his head.

Gold Button, the spy who had gotten into the trap which he had unwittingly set for himself, was on the eve of getting out.

At one time he had almost given up all hopes of ever seeing the outside of the door, but his ingenuity had prevailed over the lock, and having picked it with a steel wire which he had discovered in the room, he was about to open it and walk out to freedom.

On the stair he stopped and breathed heavily.

He had been penned up for hours and was almost exhausted.

Down the steps he crept and into the room where he had left the Man in the Satin Mask.

He knew that more than a day had passed, but he found Halliday Hood in the same chair.

"I am on the verge of starvation," he cried. "My God, if this is what one is to experience while serving the Queen of the Gray Clan, I beg to be excused."

He left the house and went out. He dropped into the first restaurant he struck, and was about to seat himself at a table when a man touched him.

Looking up he beheld Carter, who had just come from Norah.

CHAPTER XV.

A COSTLY THEFT.

CARTER who had been watching for Gold Button had the face of a suave rascal who knew how to dissemble and hide his feelings when concealment was necessary.

Reaching down in his pocket he produced the tiny vial intrusted to him by the Queen of the Clan and slipped it to Talbot.

At the same time he said something in low tones that caused a slight start on the listener's part, and for a moment the two looked at one another without speaking.

"The woman is your work; the man is mine," said Gold Button, at last.

"And the sharp belongs to Norah, eh?"

"Ah, the sharp! I think I shall have to get out and take a hand in the ferret hunt myself."

"Norah says she is equal to the emergency."

"She ought to be from the experience she has had hunting down the enemies of the Clan," grinned Talbot.

Half an hour later Gold Button sat at his desk in the library of Halliday Hood's house and was quite alone.

The shutting of a door startled him and he listened for the tread of some one in the hall.

He had not fully recovered from his experience in the little room which he had secretly ransacked for the will, and his nerves were somewhat unstrung.

"The dupe has gone to his private room and I am not needed here," he said, rising. "I will go out and see what sort of hand I can play. Besides, I would like to see Norah myself. And, then, I might run across this ferret. I know where he lives for I have seen his little room a score of times and we can't afford to give him too much start of the game."

Gold Button on the street was not the same man who acted as the spy of the Clan in the house of its victim.

Soft and oily of tongue, he could play a double hand wherever he went. He had not come into the league for nothing; Norah, its Queen, had not taken him into her counsels without knowing just what he was, and Gold Button knew that without him the game would fail.

He knew that the way to the death of the cabal and the failure of its designs was the solving of the death of Toby Sharp.

If he knew the secret carried in the bosom of the man taken from the river, he kept it to himself.

"So Mercy Sharp is lost!" he chuckled, as he walked along. "The papers don't make as much fuss over her as they did over the husband she lost. They don't advertise for her, nor the police aren't straining every nerve to find her. I wonder if this shrewd ferret who is said to be on the trail is looking for the widow? I wonder if he has any idea that she ought to be found to do him any good?"

Gold Button proceeded down several streets until he came to a short one into which he turned.

Somebody was at his heels, but he knew it.

Entering a common-looking house, he turned and watched the door.

When it opened it admitted a person who came forward and, removing a veil, looked him in the eye.

"Well? Did you quit your guest long enough to hunt me up?" said Talbot.

"Yes. She is satisfied."

"And suspects nothing?"

"She is a little restless, but I anticipate no trouble."

"Do you know that she has not been missed yet?"

"What's that? Haven't you seen the notice in the paper?" and the woman produced a newspaper which she handed to Gold Button.

The man looked at a marked "personal" and read it with a slight start.

"Who did that?" he asked.

"How do I know? I am sure I didn't."

He read it again.

It was the advertisement which called for information about Mercy Sharp and which the detective had denied having written to the Man in the Satin Mask.

"Don't you see that some one is anxious to find your guest?" said Talbot. "You must guard her closer than ever from now on. She must not write any letters."

"I am watchful."

"She must not sit by the window."

"She never does."

"I am not afraid if you do your duty. We are playing a deep game and much depends on you."

The woman nodded slightly.

"She sleeps with me," she continued. "She has a fashion of talking in her sleep."

"A good many people do that, but I hope you don't."

"Not to my knowledge," was the reply.

Gold Button took a nervous turn about the room.

"If Mercy Sharp should escape from you and go back to a certain person, we might not fare very well in the long run."

"Do you mean to a detective?"

"What made you think of that?" he cried.

"What put a detective into your head?"

"I always hated them, and I don't know who else could hurt us."

"Was that all, Nixie?"

The woman smiled.

"Confound her, she meant more than she said," he exclaimed when he was on the street again. "I don't like the way she talked. She is keeping the missing woman in hopes that the secret will be safe until we have the last cards in our hands."

He walked fast and brought up at the house occupied by Norah of the Clan.

Gold Button went in without much ceremony.

He entered the parlor near the hall and found no one there.

"Not at home, eh?" he smiled. "Maybe this is luck, for, now that I am here, I will do a little work of my own."

He first made sure that he was the only person in the house, then he glided to one of the upper rooms and with the aid of a key which he selected from a bunch he carried, he opened a door and looked forward.

A dim light pervaded a little octagon chamber, and when he crossed the threshold he carefully shut the door behind him, but did not let it catch.

His experience in Halliday Hood's house had been enough for him.

There was light enough to show him a number of small cupboards, and here and there a shelf containing some vials and vases.

"Here is where one of the secrets of the Clan is kept," he said. "This is the room which no one but Norah herself is allowed to enter. I have never seen beyond its threshold, and if she knew that I had crossed it, there might be a sudden exit of one of the players from the game."

He moved about, looking at the various things he saw. He picked up one vial after the other and carried it to the little light in the chamber. There he would hold it before his eyes and look at its contents as they were revealed in the beams.

Gold Button knew that he was in the mysterious room of the Gray Clan, that he stood on a deadly spot, and that in any one of the vials was an agent as deadly as the dagger or the pistol-ball.

And he had seen the workings of one of the poisons manufactured there; he had seen the Man in the Satin Mask move step by step to the end; he had even administered some of the deadly compound, had dropped it into his tea or placed it among his liquors; but never before had he entered the room where the white hands of Norah made it. To him the octagon chamber had been as a sealed book.

Gold Button did not count the moments that passed over his head.

The little vials seemed to have a strange fascination for him. He did not grow tired of

picking them up and looking at their contents as he shook them in the light.

The private secretary of the Man in the Satin Mask went through all the bottles in sight.

They did not look very deadly. In fact, some seemed to contain nothing but a few drops of water; but he felt that in this colorless, harmless-looking fluid was a hundred deaths.

At last Gold Button picked up a very small vial which held a fluid yellow in color and as thin as water.

He looked at it the second time and then, quick as a flash, concealed it in his clothes.

Did he know what it contained? Was he aware of the contents of the tiny vial?

With it in hiding he fell back and stole from the room.

He shut the door and locked it, then slipped down to the rooms below.

The glass of the vial was very thin, but strong. It was as light as a cork in his pocket and he almost forgot that he had anything there.

He had barely reached the parlor when the front door opened and Norah came in.

"The very man I want to see!" cried the head of the Clan the moment she saw Gold Button.

"I must have thought so else I would not have deserted my ward and come hither."

The face of the Queen of the Clan was flushed.

"We are tracked, but I have set a trap for the tracker."

"You?" cried Gold Button.

"Why not? Why shouldn't I set traps for foxes?"

"You have a right to set them, but you should be sure of your prey."

"I am sure of it. Before morning the fox of the streets will be in the trap of my setting and you can go back and watch the progress of the drops."

The next moment the head of Norah drew back and Gold Button became aware of a singular odor that pervaded the room. It rose to his nostrils and a sudden faintness stole over him.

Almost at the same instant he felt a sting next to his heart where the bottle was.

It grew to be like the deep pricking of a needle, and he had to shut his teeth hard to keep from shrieking out.

Norah's nervousness did not last long. She was soon herself again, and Gold Button found himself confronted by the coolest creature he had ever seen.

"I shall go back and watch my man," said he, anxious to escape.

He longed to grasp the infamous vial and tear it from its hiding-place. He secretly vowed that he would cast it into the gutter and grind it to powder.

But the step he took toward the door was a stagger. He tried again, but with no better results.

Norah was looking at him with a malicious smile at her mouth.

He felt the pain that seemed to be cutting its way to his heart like a surgeon's knife, and with a mighty effort he reached the door.

"Why don't you go?" asked Norah, in mockery.

He stopped and ground his teeth.

"You might as well confess," she went on.

"You have been to the Octagon Room. You have robbed me. In three minutes you will be a dead man if I don't save you."

With a curse Gold Button tore open his coat and thrust his hand into his bosom.

"There's hell in that bottle!" he cried, flinging the vial across the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOUND AT LAST.

THE Queen of the Gray Clan laughed at the mortal agony of the man before her.

The bottle, breaking against the wall, emitted a peculiar odor which was almost overpowering.

Gold Button was writhing in the middle of the room, and calling upon her to save him from the most terrible of deaths.

"You didn't think of the consequences when you secreted the vial in your bosom?" she said, coolly, still watching him as if she intended to let him die where he was. "You thought you would rob the woman to whom you owe the very breath you breathe."

A roar of pain was the reply.

Gold Button sunk down on the settee at last and prepared for the end. He was confident the head of the Clan intended to let him become a victim of one of her secret poisons.

Norah moved at last.

With her eyes riveted on the writhing wretch, she moved forward and took a vial very like the one which had worked the mischief and handed it to him.

"One draught, no more," she said.

Gold Button seized it eagerly.

Pressing it to his lips he took a long draught, and then looked at the woman who had come to his rescue.

"You owe your life to me," said Norah quietly. "In heaven's name, what took you to the Octagon Room?"

He did not answer.

"Don't you know that we work together and that the success of the one is victory for the other?"

He ground out an apology, and made haste to quit what he called "the accursed house."

"Let her catch the fox if she can," he muttered. "She will work some infernal spell and if the detective isn't as shrewd as she, he will wish he had never struck a trail."

Norah laughed over the incident just recorded.

"The fool should have known that death lurked somewhere in this house. He ought to have known from what he has been doing of late that the forbidden chamber was not to be entered by him. The next time he will have wisdom. If he took anything else I will know it for he knows nothing about handling the drops beyond what I impart."

The Queen of the Clan swept up the pieces of glass and soon nothing was left to tell how near a fool was to the edge of earthly life.

If she could have followed Gold Button she would have seen him enter a house at the mouth of a small alley and there face a man who appeared to be waiting for him.

It was Carter—Carter of the Clan.

Gold Button said nothing of his adventure, but told the man that he should watch out for Spira, as, if she was permitted to carry out her threat there might be trouble.

"I have located her," said Carter. "She has gone to the cripple's. She will be found there when I want her."

"You want her now?"

"I think so."

"You want to make sure work of this woman. She has hot blood in her veins. She has sworn to go to Velvet Van with all she knows and she knows something. Go to work."

Carter seemed to pull himself together with an effort.

"You don't shrink from the task, Carter?" asked Gold Button.

"Did I ever shrink?" queried the man.

"No, but you must not even think of doing so now."

Some color left Carter's face and catching sight of it in a mirror at that moment, he started in spite of himself.

"You may not always find her at the cripple's," said Gold Button.

"She won't be there after I am through with her!"

"That sounds better. I am willing to count on you, Carter. We all have our missions; yours is to look after the traitress, mine to take care of the Man in the Mask, and Norah has promised to entrap the detective."

"What sort of a trap is she going to set for him?" he asked.

"That's her secret."

"Then, she didn't tell you?"

"She did not."

"I am going now. I shall watch the house, and the moment she comes out—she won't stay there long if she intends to go to the ferret—I will be at her heels, and she will have me there until all is over. But really, Gold Button, don't you think we should look after the ferret?"

"Do you fear a failure by Norah's trap?"

"It is not that exactly, but there is a chance that it may be sprung too soon, or a mite too late, and if he once suspects he may close in on the Clan."

"What, one man!" laughed Gold Button.

"But that one man is a host."

"So they say. You go back to the trail of the traitress and leave the fox to Norah. There will be no failure."

The men separated, and Carter found himself on the street and in the vicinity of the cripple's roost.

The house looked quiet, and he fell to watching it, wondering when Spira would come out and give him a chance to follow her.

But the desperate woman was not there. If Carter had entered the place and climbed the steps to where the cripple sat in the chair he never left, he would have found him alone. The woman, called his sister, was gone.

In a room, the door of which was locked against all intruders, sat Spira looking over the table at a man who was listening to what she was saying.

Her last visit had been unsuccessful.

She had found the man of trails at last, and for fully ten minutes had been talking without interruption.

Velvet Van had listened without losing a word of her startling sentences.

She had gone back years in the life of Norah, the Queen of the dread Gray Clan. She had forged the chain of crime link by link, giving the ferret a full description of the interior of the woman's house, all but the Octagon Room, for beyond its threshold she had never stepped.

She told what she knew about the designs of the Clan, how it was to put out of the way the Man in the Satin Mask, and all she knew about him, which was not much, she told without hesitation.

It was a wonderful story of crime and plot. And Spira knew while she was telling it that she was doomed by the Clan, that she was hunted by those with whom she had served the

Queen of the league, and that even then she was in the shadow of a mysterious death.

Velvet Van made no notes of what he heard. He kept in his head the whole plot as divulged by the woman who had turned traitress rather than drive a poisoned pin into the flesh of Muriel, the beautiful refugee at old Ramon's house.

"One thing you have omitted," said the ferret when Spira had finished. "You know so much, yet you have not mentioned one person who seems to be an actor in the game."

"Name him."

"I mean the child dreamer."

The woman started back and clutched the table for support.

"I did not mention the girl, because—"

She checked herself.

"Because you don't think her important enough?" smiled Van.

"No, not that; that is not it. Let me stop where I am."

"But the child is not old Ramon's?"

"Heavens, no!"

"How did she fall into his hands?"

"She was left at his step like waifs are sometimes."

"A nameless waif?"

"Yes."

"But—"

Spira arose and put her hands before her white face.

"I will stop here whether you will it or not," she cried. "I will not talk about the dream-child of the old spring-maker's house. I have suffered enough and you must pardon my silence on this point."

She fell back and would have rushed from the room if she had not found the door locked.

"They will track you if you go out," said the ferret looking at her as she stood trying to open the portal.

"I know it. I have been hunted before."

"They will put a trail-dog on your track and if he finds you you may quit the Clan sure enough."

Spira smiled ghastly.

"And if they should find you, what?" she asked. "What if they should entrap you, Captain Cue?"

"Oh, I'm used to that, but you are not. You have gone back to the cripple of X—street. Do you consider yourself safe there?"

"I don't think I am real safe anywhere. The hand of Norah of the Clan is all-powerful. The Man in the Satin Mask is dying by inches in his elegant home. Are you going to save him?"

"You tell me that the poison in his veins can't be counteracted. If that is true—"

"Norah knows much about the secret agents that take people off. Can't you see that when all is over and they have stripped the mask of satin from the long-hidden face, there will be a surprise, for the books of the police department ought to contain a photograph of that man."

The detective was silent.

"Go to the trail, now that I have shown you where it is," continued Spira. "I will go back to the covert and wait on your success. But here, take this. I have reserved it till the last moment. It is not an antidote for the secret drugs of the Queen Norah's Octagon Room. It is something else. Don't open it until you are in her trap, if ever you get there. If you reach the end of this mystery without having felt her hand of cunning, burn it or throw it to the river as they threw Toby Sharp."

Velvet Van took the sealed paper which Spira handed across the table and held it in his hand.

"Ah, Toby Sharp! He carried too many secrets in his bosom, didn't he?"

"Just one too many," smiled the woman.

"He knew who the Satin Mask is; he had discovered the past of his life, and also something about the life of the woman who is at the head of this cool, calculating death-league of the metropolis. What was the latter secret, Spira?"

"You must ask Norah for that, or, if the dead lips of Toby Sharp could speak, you need not go to her for the secret."

Spira stood at the door and the detective before letting her out went down upon the street and used his keen eyes for a while.

"Don't let them find you," were his parting words. "Don't stir from the cripple's den. On no occasion come out upon the streets of Gotham. There is danger, death everywhere. The Clan is desperate. I am in for fight. I know nearly all that I need to know. I shall let the child dream once more for me."

"The child! For God's sake stand between Juno the dreamer and the deadly agents of the Gray Clan!" cried the woman. "You don't know what the child is to me—You—But what am I saying? Sometimes I say too much. I am out of my head now. Go to work, Captain Cue. You have all of them against you."

"Even the Man in the Satin Mask?" said the ferret.

CHAPTER XVII.

MURIEL ON THE RACK.

WITH Spira's strange but exciting story fresh in his mind, the detective soon afterward turned up at old Ramon's the spring-maker.

The little old man was seated at his work-bench and the hammer was falling on a long piece of steel which he had beaten to a wonderful thinness.

The light that nearly always threw the shadow of Ramon on the wall showed the ferret his dark face and bright little orbs.

"Well, have you come back to rob the child of more chalk?" asked the spring-maker, looking up with a curious look in his eyes.

Velvet Van smiled.

"I can't say that I have come for that, but if she wants to dream again for me I'm sure I sha'n't object."

"Of course not, robber," grinned old Ramon, playfully. "You have been at work since she dreamt last for you—since she told you how Toby Sharp went to the river."

"I am never idle."

Ramon Ravenclaw dropped the hammer and turned full upon the ferret.

"I am about to begin in earnest," said Velvet Van. "I shall take the real trail of the crime within the next hour."

"Ah! then you know something."

The old spring-maker was eying him like a hawk and when the detective inclined his ear toward the door as if he had heard a footstep on the stairs, he started.

It was Muriel coming down, and old Ramon knew it.

Before she could be detained she opened the door and stood before Velvet Van.

The eyes of the Shadower of the city seemed to bulge from his head, but only for a moment, for Muriel, drawing back with a little cry of alarm, looked at him with very little color in her cheeks.

"Not so fast," said the detective, rising and approaching her. "I have been looking for you."

"For me?" exclaimed the astonished girl.

"For you. You are Muriel, but your secret is safe with me."

Reassured, the young girl came back and stood before the man of many trails.

"You are the detective?" she said.

"I am Velvet Van. I am the man on the trail, and that trail interests you."

She did not speak.

"I am trying to solve the mystery of two lives. In the first place, I want to know who carried the body of Toby Sharp to the river."

Muriel shot old Ramon a quick glance. She recalled the old man's words to the effect that when the detective took up the case it would prove exciting and hot for them.

All at once the eyes of the spring-maker seemed to emit flashes of fire.

"I forbid!" he cried, bringing his hammer down upon the bench. "I will not have the young lady questioned here and now."

Velvet Van turned to him and looked him through.

"You must remember that I am working in the cause of justice," he said. "I am on the trail of crime. I am risking my life in this hunt, and you know it."

"I?"

"You, Papa Ramon," he went on. "I am in this matter to remain until all has been brought to light. You shall let me talk to the young lady. She may keep her secrets if she wants to, but I shall talk, and you may sit and listen or retire."

There was resolution in the ferret's tones, and for a moment the eye of the old man covered him in a wicked manner.

Muriel had not moved an inch. She was fighting a mental battle. Did the detective intend to wrest from her, if he could, all she knew concerning the Man in the Satin Mask? Was he after the secrets of the house on the avenue?

For a moment longer old Ramon looked at the persons before him and then retreating from the work-bench, laid his hand on the door, and said:

"Talk to her, but Muriel knows just how far to go," and with this he quitted the workshop and left them alone.

"Must this be?" said Muriel. "I will not betray those who have been kind to me, and though they may not be just what they should in the eyes of the law, you cannot expect me to turn my back on them and hand them over to the police."

"If you refer to the Man in the Mask you will not be asked to betray him. I do not want to know what his face is like—"

"I could not tell you that even if I tried, for I have never seen it," broke in Muriel. "There are secrets which have been kept from me, and though I have lived under the same roof that shelters him, I am not trusted very far."

She smiled in a manner that increased her beauty, and the ferret drew from his pocket a letter which he extended.

Tremblingly Muriel broke the seal and glanced at the writing.

A blush suffused her face.

"I have not tried to hide from him," she said, looking up, "so much as to keep out of the way of others."

"He is much concerned about you, and I was to give you the letter if I discovered you."

Velvet Van watched the girl as she read the letter from Oliver Ott, her lover, and when she

had finished she put it away and blushed as she caught the shadow's eye.

"Does the child ever dream for you?" asked Van.

"She did last night."

"Then, you have tested her?"

"I have. My curiosity was so strong that I could not govern it. I told her a story before she went to sleep and extemporized a blackboard in our room where she wrote a little for me."

"You wanted to get at a secret, didn't you?"

"I did. It may have been the same one you are after."

"I am solving the Toby Sharp case."

"Always Toby Sharp!" exclaimed Muriel. "Will I never cease to hear that name?"

"Not until the maze has been threaded; not until I am at the end of the trail."

"I watched Juno in her sleep and when she started from her couch I guided her to the blackboard in our own little room and instead of writing for old Ramon, she wrote for me. I did not like to sap the child's strength, but I could not help it."

"And you made a note of what she left on the board?"

"A mental note! Not for the world would I have transferred it to paper. It was too horrible for that."

"Too horrible according to your estimate," smiled Velvet Van.

"Perhaps."

"Now, Muriel, leaving the dreamer for a moment, what made you give up the home on the avenue?"

"He told me it was my time to go."

"Don't he want you to lift the mask when he is dead and look into his eyes?"

"That is it."

The detective's face seemed to approach that of the girl's.

"You have never seen it, you say?"

"Never."

"Do you think Talbot ever gazed upon it?"

A quick start by Muriel fastened the eyes of the Shadower closer than ever upon her.

She hated the man with the scar above his eyes.

It seemed to her that he was a snake in the nest, that he was to be blamed in a measure for the strange malady that was sapping the life of the Man in the Satin Mask.

"There is no telling what that man has done," she said with a shudder. "I believe him capable of anything."

"You don't like Talbot?"

"I hate the ground he treads."

"He goes out?"

"Often."

"He remains out sometimes for hours and nearly always at night?"

"That is Talbot exactly."

"You have never followed him?"

"That would be dangerous. I follow this man? No, I never did that!"

"How did he come to enter the employ of Halliday Hood?"

"God knows. I came down one morning and he introduced himself as the private secretary. I had no idea until then that such a man as he existed."

"Since that time he has been in the house?"

"Day and night since then."

"Was your guardian afflicted with the strange disease before Talbot came?"

"He was not. At least I noticed nothing wrong with him until after the serpent slipped into the nest. But the mask was worn and I knew nothing of the face beneath it."

"Yes, but the hand of death seemed not to have touched him up to that time?"

"That is what I mean; but do you think—are you suspecting—that Talbot—"

She stopped suddenly and looked into the detective's face.

"I am making no charges. That is not my game now. I am questioning you, Muriel, that is all."

She fell back smiling, but not losing sight of the eyes before her.

"Let me tell you something. It all comes back now, and while it is before me I will talk. One night there came a woman to the house."

"A woman, Muriel?"

"I was on the stair when the door opened, and she glided in. I almost betrayed myself, but kept cool and watched her creep to the library where Talbot was. I crept down the steps and looked into the room over the transom. There they were—she and the man with the scar—at the desk where he usually wrote, and I watched them a long while. I thought of going to the Mask's chamber and telling him that a stranger was in the house, but fear held me back. Then, I was afraid of losing something important by going away, and curiosity held me to the stair. They were together nearly an hour. I could not hear a word that was said, for they spoke in whispers, but that it was an important conference I could see. When the strange creature rose to quit the house she placed something in Talbot's hands, and he transferred it to his pocket. I saw it shine for an instant ere it disappeared, and the next moment I was crouching breathless amid the

shadows of the stair, and she went out as noiselessly as she had come in."

"You saw her but the one time?"

"But the once, and then I did not get a very good look at her face, for it was half-veiled, as if she was afraid some one would be on the alert."

"Isn't the house locked nights?"

"Usually, but that night it was not locked; at least, the woman came in without knocking and went direct to the library."

"What was she like, Muriel?"

"Rather tall, and had the carriage of one born amid a certain refinement."

"I am done. You have been very kind, and looking over what you have said, you will discover that you have betrayed no friend."

"That is true. If I have betrayed any person, it has been an enemy," said Muriel.

The ferret looked toward the door which led into the hall and wondered if Papa Ramon had had his sharp ears there during the conversation.

In another moment the door opened, and the old spring-maker glided in.

"Ah, you have done with the witness?" he grinned. "I see that you have left her living?"

"Yes, and she has betrayed no friends," was the reply.

"Ha! that is good; then I am safe," and the old man laughed, showing his ragged teeth, and then went back to the bench as if he had been interrupted but for a moment.

When Velvet Van stood once more on the street he saw the lamps of Gotham on either hand.

"Now for the trail furnished by the dream-child," said he. "I will soon discover if she really sees the mysterious in her strangely-written visions."

He started off and turned up in a distant part of the city.

"If the deed was committed in this part of New York I will find the track of the blood-hounds."

He plunged into a dark alley and vanished.

When he came into sight once more he leaned against a door and was listening.

All at once the door opened and he almost fell inside.

A head was thrust into the alley and the detective watched it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FERRET IS TRAPPED.

It was the head of a woman and Velvet Van saw that it was toward him.

When it was withdrawn, which it was in a short time, he sprang to the door and by holding the knob in a certain position, kept the key which was turned from locking him out.

He waited awhile longer and then opened the door.

In another second he was in a narrow hall, and beyond it he caught the glimmer of a light.

It was not the first time he had entered unknown houses when on the trail. He knew that nothing was to be gained without some risk and when he slipped along the carpeted hallway he was ready for any emergency.

But the door at the end of the corridor was locked.

As Velvet Van was about to catch a glimpse of the room beyond by applying an eye to the keyhole, he heard the voice of a child and drew back.

Then came the shuffling of feet and the door opened in his very face.

But fortunately for the detective he was on the side which was thrown back to the wall, and the person who came into the hall did not see him.

The woman was before him again, but this time she carried a child in her arms.

He watched her until she vanished in a side room and he heard the lock click.

The ferret of Gotham had seen something which confirmed in a measure Juno's dream.

The woman had appeared to him like a person he knew, but the child had simply described her on the black-board.

It was from this house that Juno had tracked Toby Sharp on his last trip to the river.

It was from the door which he had just entered that she had described how a muffled figure was carried to a cab and taken to within a square of the river, and the woman he had seen was the one who had held a light which enabled the dreamer to see the whole affair and describe it to the detective.

There was something terribly true in what the Wonder had dreamed of.

Velvet Van felt that he had entered a house of danger, if not of death. It belonged in some manner to the Gray Clan and he knew not how many pitfalls it contained.

While he watched for the return of the woman who had taken the child into the other room he moved not, but kept his eyes fixed steadily on the door.

When it opened the same figure appeared, but this time it carried no light.

The ferret saw the dim form approach him, but all at once it vanished up the stairs in the hall and he heard another door open overhead.

Velvet Van felt the carpet on the steps and crept up after the woman.

He was midway on the flight when he felt the last step sink under his feet.

He stopped and tried to save himself by clutching a bare wall. In a flash it rushed across his mind that the cool-headed woman had touched a secret spring which had worked a trap, or deadfall, and he was to be the victim.

The ferret exerted all his strength and sprang forward.

A dull noise behind him told him that a portion of the flight had fallen, but he had leaped the dark chasm and stood holding to the upper part, saved by the very skin of his teeth.

All was now as dark as Erebus to the Shadower.

He heard the beating of his own heart and that was all.

This went on for some moments when a dim light appeared and he crouched in one corner of the cramped space and listened.

The parted steps came back to their old position; he heard them join again, but could see nothing definite despite the light that now prevailed.

What had become of the woman who had sprung the trap?

Velvet Van waited for the next move.

All at once the light above his head grew brighter and he looked up into a human face.

It was a picture of mingled surprise and terror.

The owner of that face leaned down and glared at the man on the stair.

"Move not at your peril!" said the detective, at the same time pushing upward a revolver with which he covered the white-faced creature.

There was no answer.

Velvet Van went forward and halted within reach of the face he had found.

It was the same one he had seen over the muffled body of the child and looking into the eyes he saw that they were gleaming with disappointment.

"The trap failed," said the ferret, "You should have sprung it a moment sooner."

The eyes glowed madly, but not a word was spoken.

The following moment he had darted forward and held the arm of the strange woman.

"Into which room?" he asked, holding her in a grip of iron.

"You are the ferret?" she said.

"You have guessed my identity."

"You are the man who is on the trail."

"I am on the trail."

"Into yon room, then."

She looked toward a door at her left and the detective opened it with a kick.

"Shut the door, please. I don't want Neva to hear us."

He did so and a lock clicked.

The detective struck a match and lighted a gas-burner in one corner of the chamber.

He found himself in a small room almost devoid of furniture.

In spite of his promised coolness he started again.

It was the room described by Juno on the blackboard.

The woman who had drooped into one of the three chairs in the room was staring at him, but her lips did not move.

Velvet Van saw that she was angular of feature and sharp-witted. Her age might have been forty, but she did not show it for her hair was very black and her eyes youthful in their gleam.

"What do you want?" she asked at last.

"You ought to know, since you have called me a detective."

"I don't know anything for a person of your kind. I am a Sphinx when it comes to talking to a man-hunter."

"It happened here and you know all about the deed."

"Come," she cried, showing her white teeth.

"You are talking in riddles now and I am a poor guesser. A good many things may have happened in an old house like this and I not know of half of them. I haven't lived here all my life."

She was determined to baffle the man-hunter if possible, and he had already discovered that he had met an enemy worthy of all his skill.

There was something provoking in the mien of the creature in the chair before him. She was as cool as a Borgia and her face was an unreadable puzzle.

For some time the detective gazed at her and noticed that she did not take her eyes from him.

There was no glancing toward the door of the room; she did not look for help and yet she was in his hands.

"You were here," said the ferret. "You held the light while they carried the body to the cab."

"The body?"

"The corpse that was picked out of the river by the patrol."

"Did the patrol find a body among the waves?"

How exasperatingly cool she was!

"The patrol found a corpse in the river. It was the corpse of Tobias Sharp, and you know how it came there."

"That is saying a good deal and saying it boldly, I think," was the reply. "It is the next door to an accusation of murder. Here I am," and she held out her hands for the manacles.

"So one Tobias Sharp has been found in the river!" she went on. "He should have kept out of the water, for when one is found there he is apt to go to the dead-house."

"He did go there. What has become of the man who choked Toby in the darkest corner of this room?"

"You are very precise," she smiled. "The man who choked Toby Sharp in this room? Did the doctors find that the dead man had been strangled?"

Nine men out of ten would have lost their patience, but Velvet Van was the tenth man.

To lose patience now would be to lose the game and get into trouble, and he realized this more than ever.

"I don't intend to be accused of having to do with murdering a man with my child asleep down below," she suddenly cried, starting to her feet and towering like an Amazon before the astonished ferret.

He moved aside and placed himself between her and the door.

"You will wait till I am ready to go out," he said, sternly. "I am not through with you. You have sprung a trap to-night, and people who live honest lives don't spring traps."

"They don't, eh? And folks who are leading honest lives, who are not shadowing innocent people, don't enter houses like a thief and accuse a mother of crime."

There was a flash in the eyes that regarded the detective, and the woman took a step toward the door.

"Don't you hear my child? She has started from her sleep, and, if not rocked for a moment, will fill the whole house with her cries."

Velvet Van had heard nothing; but he knew the keenness of a mother's hearing and mechanically stepped aside.

Putting out one of his hands he seized the woman's wrist and led her toward the door.

"We will go down together," she said. "You see I am not afraid to be led by you."

They went down the steps and into the room to which he had shadowed her a short time before.

There was a crib in one corner and the woman led the ferret forward.

"Let me take Neva for a moment," she said, looking up into his face.

Velvet Van dropped the hand he held and stepped back.

He saw the figure of the woman bend over the crib and her hands vanished for a second.

But suddenly they came out of the mass of childish apparel and as she fell back and straightened, he looked into the muzzles of two gleaming six-shooters!

"You are not the sharp ferret you thought yourself!" she laughed, her eyes glittering like dancing diamonds behind the weapons. "Velvet Van, there are more ways than one of catching the pavement foxes of New York. You have come to the wrong place for the clew to the Toby Sharp case. You have walked into a trap which was set for you before you turned your face toward it, and you are to die here and make another mystery such as the shrewdest of your kind will never work out. They call me Gloria the Gloved because my hands are always as soft as kids; but they are as terrible as hands of steel when they are needed against men of your kind."

A pair of baby hands appeared above the top of the crib, but they did not take the mother's eye from the man she held at the mercy of her revolvers.

"You have come to the house of secrets and of death. There is no escape for you, for you have discovered too much already. Are you working for glory, or has some one hired you to unearth the hands that rid the world of the betrayer of secrets? It matters not which. You are dead to the world. You are in a trap from which no man ever went out alive. I am going to send a bullet through your brain, for the old saying that 'dead men tell no tales' is as true as Gospel. The lips touched by death reveal nothing and the keenest detective hears no secret from them."

Once more the little hands came up over the top of the crib; this time they were lifted higher than ever and then the child began to lift its body over the edge of the cradle.

In another moment it was poised between the edge and the floor and was about to fall headforemost to the carpet.

"Your child, madame!" said Velvet Van.

The woman did not turn her head.

"Your life first!" was the answer. "The fox shall die, but the child will not."

The next instant one of the revolvers flashed in the ferret's face and he fell back, while the creature called Gloria sprang to her babe ere it dropped from the crib.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FLIGHT OF A CAGELING.

The writing of the dream-child had led the detective into a death-trap.

As Velvet Van fell back from the flash of the woman's revolver, the room suddenly became dark, and all was still.

This state of things lasted for a time, and then the door opened and the figure of the strange creature was seen. She held the child in her arms, and was looking over her shoulder at the form of a man that lay on the floor against the foot of the wall.

There was in her eye a malignant gleam that looked like that which the hunter sees in the orbs of the tiger that stands over him after a false shot.

"The fox is dead," she said at last. "He came to the trap almost before it was ready for him, but he found it just as deadly as if everything had been prepared. I don't see why I should remain another night in this place. The woman on the other floor did not hear the shot, and knows nothing of what has happened. I shall take her with me. It is time to go."

Gloria climbed the same stair which she had dropped upon the detective, and entered a room to the right of the top of the flight.

It seemed that she had entered an adjoining house, but it was the same one, though the sound of the pistol-shot had not been heard there.

"She still carried the child, which seemed to have gone to sleep again in her arms, and entering the room which she had reached, she stepped noiselessly across the threshold, and bent over a couch at one side of the chamber.

"Come! We are going to quit this house. They are after you, and the same hands that sent your husband to the river will find both of us if we don't clear out."

The woman on the couch uttered a slight scream, which the other stifled with a sign, and in a moment Mercy Sharp was dressing herself with haste.

"Where will we hide next?" she asked.

"I will show you; but we can't afford to tarry here."

"Did you see them?"

"I know that they are near."

"Perhaps I would be safer back in the old house."

"You must not think so. They would be sure to look for you there. There are other places safer than that! Have you heard anything?"

Toby Sharp's widow shook her head.

In a few moments the two women were on the street, and the one who had faced the spotter of Gotham hailed a cab at one corner, and both entered.

There was a look of dumb wonderment in Mrs. Sharp's eyes. She wondered what had occurred to change her place of residence so suddenly. Was it true that the murderers of Toby had found her out, and had turned their hands against her? She had not communicated with the outside world since leaving the old home, and had wondered what Velvet Van was doing.

If he had discovered the trail she would like to know it. If he was still at work for her, why wouldn't Gloria let her send word to the ferret acquainting him with her present whereabouts?

For some time the cab rattled them over the stones of the city and when it stopped they were in a part of the metropolis which was strange to the widow.

They alighted and entered a house the door of which Gloria unlocked.

The furnishings of this place were good and attracted Mercy's attention. Everything betokened wealth and when she was shown to a bedroom on the second floor and left there with the assurance that she was at last entirely safe from the killers of her husband, she sunk into a chair with a sigh of relief.

Safe at last! There was something in that.

More than an hour had passed since her departure from the last house and she was not sleepy. It was as if she had had her nap out and she watched the gas as it flickered near the wall showing her the appointments of the place.

"If I could get a letter to Velvet Van I don't think there would be any wrong doing in it," she said. "They would not let me write before this because it might become a clew to the men who murdered Toby."

She hunted the room over but found nothing on which she could write.

At last she spied a book covered with dust and on a shelf nearly out of reach and in a moment the blank leaf was in her hand.

The stub of a pencil which she had treasured up during her hiding completed the writing materials and in a short time she had written to the ferret-sharp.

If she had known what had taken place that very night she might not have exerted herself in that direction. If she could have witnessed the scene in the room of the old house she would not have traced a line of the discolored paper, but instead would have tried to escape bodily.

The letter written, she hid it on her person and crept to the stair.

The house was new to her and she did not know which way the steps led.

Down the flight she went until she found herself in the hall below and was near the door. As yet she had been seen by no one.

Mercy Sharp found the door locked, but the key was on the inside and with beating heart she laid her hand upon it.

In all likelihood there was a letter-box at the nearest corner. It was worth trying anyhow.

Opening the door she glided out and looked up and down the street.

Seeing no one, she crept away toward the corner with the letter clutched in her hand.

She was in the act of dropping the letter into the iron box on the lamp-post when a man came out of the shadows of the nearest building.

Mercy Sharp uttered a cry and fell back, her heart in her throat and her blood congealing in her veins.

She saw the malicious eyes that were fixed upon her, saw, too, the face which, once seen, was not likely ever to be forgotten, and above all, though it was not needed to complete the recognition, she caught sight of the scar between those very eyes.

The man with the red scar had come before her again!

The woman almost dropped the letter which had nearly touched the letter-box.

She stood like one frightened out of her senses by the sudden appearance of the man.

"Go back from whence you came. In God's name, woman, don't you know that you are in danger of your very life here?"

The voice started Mrs. Sharp out of her trance of fear.

"I won't if you are my pretended friend," she said. "I have seen you once too often. You are the man with the red scar and you don't wear it for nothing."

She had suddenly become defiant, and desperation was tugging at her heart strings.

The man with the scar advanced upon her. She neither retreated nor relinquished her hold on the letter.

"I am Mercy Sharp whose husband was murdered by those who wanted him out of the way because he knew too much," she cried.

"The very reason why you should not be seen on the streets of New York. What's in your hand there?"

He had caught sight of the letter. She had not concealed it well enough to escape his piercing eyes.

Mercy drew back and hid the missive; then she thought of the letter-box and started toward it. Once in there it would be safe.

Like a desperate creature she lifted the letter lid and the letter was half-way in when he arrested her hand.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"A letter," cried Mercy in triumph.

"To whom?"

She didn't speak.

"Woman," he went on, dragging her away,

"You shall tell me to whom you have written."

"I will not. I will die first!"

She looked every word of it now. She jerked back and so suddenly that his hold was broken.

In another instant she was flying down the street.

"This is almighty queer," said the man with the scar, looking after her. "In the name of the Clan, how came she in this part of the city? Where is Gloria the Gloved, and who brought the widow to this neighborhood?"

By this time the fleeing woman was out of sight and the man was still cursing his ill-luck while he appeared half-dazed by the singular events.

On, went Mercy Sharp, free at last, but with fear at her heart and every face that of a hunter.

She did not stop until she had crossed the city. She had kept in the shadows of the buildings and at last reached a part of New York with which she was familiar.

But should she go back to the old nest? Would they not look for her there?

Why not go to the detective and tell him more than she had written?

She stopped to collect her thoughts. The ferret's office was not far off. She had but to turn two corners and would be where it was. He could tell her where to hide.

Resolved to seek Velvet Van, Mercy turned away and walked on again. She found the open hallway and climbed the stairs. She was once more at Velvet Van's door.

This time she did not knock, but caught the knob and wrenched it half-savagely.

Locked!

A groan of despair fell from the woman's lips. Leaning against the wall near the door, she tried to recover her spirits.

She seemed alone in the world; not only that, but she was a hunted woman, hunted by the same hand that had taken her husband's life.

She heard the deep tones of a clock as it struck a full hour.

Starting back, she went down the steps, her limbs seeming to give way beneath her. She was exhausted.

"My God, if I fall here they will find me, and I will waken in their power! Save me, Heaven!"

She tottered to the last step and rested in the hall below. There she found she could go no further.

"I will find an officer and put myself under

his care," rushed through her brain. "I will not let them find me here and take me back. I can go to the next corner. I—I—Merciful God, it has come!"

She reeled and fell against the wall near the opening. Her figure sunk to the floor and she lay quiet and white-faced, with her hand just over the threshold and on the pavement.

Unconsciousness had come to Mercy Sharp. She had swooned at the foot of the ferret's stairs, and those who passed never saw the pleading hand.

At last a street urchin came along and almost tripped on the pallid wrist.

"Crush me for a dude, here's a go!" cried the boy. "Bless my stars if it ain't a woman—a female what has been killed by some one like Jack the Ripper," and he hailed an officer on the opposite sidewalk.

CHAPTER XX.

BUBBLES OF DEATH.

HALLIDAY HOOD with the satin mask on his face, was occupying the same chair he was wont to fill in the room adjoining the library which Talbot devoted to his toils.

But Talbot, or Gold Button, was not there and the hour was growing late.

The Man in the Satin Mask was looking at some papers which he had taken from a safe in one corner of the large room—a safe, the contents of which were as well known to the dread Gray Clan as to himself.

He was quite alone.

The door leading to the library was ajar, but the light there was turned down so low that objects within its precincts were not very plain.

The lower part of the mask moved feverishly, as if the papers before the victim of the Clan were of the utmost importance. Perhaps he had brought them down from the room where he sometimes looked at the face he kept from the world when he was not enacting the role of Nixon and playing with one of the coolest spotters of the city.

Suddenly the papers fell from his hands and he leaned back in his chair.

"I wonder if my ferret meant what he said when he told me that he intended to discover all there is to discover irrespective of the man who put him on the trail? That means me, if he does. He will turn against me the moment he finds it to his advantage to do so. I know these foxes. I know that they will serve any one and then sell out. That is, some of them will, and I have had to do with enough to know that many are purchasable."

He arose, put the papers back into the safe and locked it.

He went into the library and looked into Talbot's desk.

At that moment the front door opened. Believing that the secretary had come in, the Man in the Satin Mask fell back and retired to his own quarters.

The door shut as softly as it had opened.

A gliding step crossed the hall and opened the door of the library.

Halliday Hood leaned toward the semi-darkened room and looked into it.

The person who had come in was not Gold Button.

The next moment the Satin Mask was staring open-eyed at the visitor, who was looking around like a person somewhat disappointed.

The figure of a female stood before him, and while he looked he shrunk back and took a revolver from the table-drawer.

There was a most devilish flash in the dark eyes behind the mask; they seemed to dance with insane delight, as if he had recognized in the figure in the other room that of a deadly foe who had been brought to him by some fatal chance.

The woman did not see him, half hidden as he was by the door ajar.

She first made sure that Gold Button was not at home, and then seated herself at the desk.

Taking up a pen, she wrote a moment on a sheet of paper that offered itself.

In another second she was ready to go.

The Satin Mask went across the velvet carpet like a tiger sneaking upon its prey.

Still, she heard him not.

There was something in one of Hood's hands which was not a six-shooter.

The skeleton fingers gripped something which he had taken from the drawer the same time with the revolver.

Slowly approaching her as she placed the note she had written where Talbot would be likely to find it upon his return, the Man in the Satin Mask glided upon her.

One of his hands was lifted above her shoulder. He glared at her like a fiend, and all at once burst into a laugh so inhuman that the woman turned with a start.

"My God!" she cried.

Halliday Hood leaned toward her and looked her through with the sunken eyes.

"Sit down there!" he said.

The woman did not move.

"The hand on the edge of the grave has the power to kill. It will kill if I am not obeyed."

She went back to the chair she had just left. "This is more than I hoped for," he went on. "I did not look for you in this house, but fate plays some queer pranks at times, and this is one of them. I have been wanting to see you these many days. How do you think I'm looking?"

There was sarcasm in his tones and the eyes were laughing now.

"You know I can't see for the mask," she replied.

"Well, you know anyhow, so I won't take it off. I know now with whom you are in league. You came here to seek your accomplice. You left a note for him in the desk. I will read it by and by."

With her eyes riveted upon him, she did not answer.

"We need not go back over the past. I don't know how much time I have, for you have measured it, and it is liable to terminate within the next ten minutes."

She smiled as if to confirm his words.

"Let us meet death with death," he continued, showing for the first time the object in his left hand. "I think I have the quickest agent, though it can't be surer than the ones you use."

She was looking at the vial he held up and saw that the white liquid therein was dancing in bubbles against its clear sides.

"There is but one dose in the vial. I had saved it for myself, intending to baffle your poison some time; but you will test it first, and I can get more."

He placed the vial near her hand by a quick movement, and she, turning her head, looked at it a moment.

"Take it. Drink it all," he commanded. "As I have said, we won't discuss the past. I am fighting you all now and so is my detective."

"Your detective?" she cried.

"Yes. Didn't you know I had employed a ferret? There is one on the trail at this very moment, but, curse him, he wants to discover too much."

"How too much?"

"He wants to find out who killed Toby Sharp and who I am. Ha, ha, he made me laugh when he gave his designs away. Find out who I am? The city wants to know, but it will not. You and your Clan know all, and knowing it, you have given me the death potion. But take the poison in the vial. Drink it down!"

She looked from him to the bottle at her hand, but did not take it up.

"What, aren't you going to swallow its contents?" he went on.

"You can't force me to do anything."

"There was a time—"

He stopped himself and the eyes danced once more.

Did he fear that Talbot would come back and interrupt this scene? Was he afraid that he would lose this creature—the Head of the Gray Clan—and never be able to find her again, for she would not come into such a trap?

"You will take the poison or be found in the chair disfigured when Talbot comes," he suddenly said. "I have played the game nearly out. I may never hear the last report of my ferret. I will not live to see him at the end of his trail which he may reach if he does not interfere with me. Toby Sharp was the start of the trail; he is looking into the death of the old man. I knew whose hand did the deed the moment I saw something of the river find in the journals. It wasn't very well done, for one of the doctors said something about foul play and I suspect that started the ferret on the scent. But confound it, Lady Murder, I am exhausting my time. The wine of death awaits you."

He waved his hand toward the vial, but did not remove his eyes from her impassioned face.

"I take nothing," she said.

The masked face was suddenly thrown back; the revolver seemed to near her forehead and the hand at the trigger was seen to contract.

"Wait!" cried the Queen of the Clan.

"What is it?"

She picked up the vial and held it between her and the light just over the desk.

"I never saw anything like this," she said, coolly.

"Is it unlike the kinds of death you prepare?" he laughed. "You see there is destruction outside of the Octagon Room. Lady Murder, you will feel for a second young again after you have taken the contents of the vial—so they say."

She shook the vial again and looked at it with the eye of a keen critic.

"How long will I live after taking it?"

"Three minutes is the limit."

"You don't want me to die in the house?"

"Die wherever you can!" was the answer.

"Is it a painful death?"

"Not very. As I have said, you will feel yourself young again, but not for long."

She turned back to the vial and looked at it again.

"Must I take it all? Don't you want some?" she asked.

"I've got enough as it is."

The revolver crept closer to the woman's face as if the Man in the Satin Mask had suddenly discovered that she was only talking for time—

holding him off till some one—Talbot?—could come to the rescue.

"I shall count three," said he, deliberately. "If at the end of that time you have not taken the dose, I will spoil your beauty with powder and ball."

She welded her lips at this and pushed back the chair.

"Stand back!" she said. "Give me a chance."

He receded a step and watched like a hawk.

The next moment she gripped the bottle and seemed to strive to crush it in her hand but all at once dashed it to her lips and swallowed its contents.

A strange cry emanated from beneath the satin mask as this was done.

The woman's act seemed to have startled Haliday Hood.

"Give me a chance!" she cried again, dashing down the revolver he clutched and starting toward the hall.

"I don't want to die in this house. I have three minutes, you say?"

"Barely two now."

A spring carried her across the room; she paused a moment at the door half open and threw him a look he never forgot.

"Ha, my two minutes are years! I still have you in my grip and the Gray Clan lives to baffle you and your ferret."

Her regal figure was drawn up like that of a victor and her hand covered him while he looked at her astonished.

"Do you think I came to this house without preparation? I know the man I fight. I know an antidote that kills the deadliest poisons made. Ha, ha. If you look behind you you will see the ghost of Toby Sharp."

The Man in the Satin Mask threw a look over his shoulder, and when he turned to her again a figure vanished in the hallway and he heard the closing of a door.

"She lied for once!" he cried. "She'll be dead before she touches the pavement!" and he ran to the window and with a mad hand tore aside the curtains.

CHAPTER XXI.

CARTER MAKES A PROPOSAL.

HALLIDAY HOOD caught sight of a figure as it flitted down the pavement, but that was all. He did not see the Queen of the Clan fall as he expected to the stones, dead from the effect of the draught she had taken in his presence.

Not satisfied he went to the door and tried to follow the figure with his eager eyes.

But she had already vanished and he was forced to go back to curse his ill fortune and to wonder if she had carried about an antidote for the drug.

"It can't be that she, even with what she knows of subtle poisons, can counteract that one," he said. "She boasted, though, that the three minutes I gave her might become three years, but it cannot be. Now I will wait for her accomplice, but first I will see what she left for him in the desk."

He went to the desk in the library and picked up a bit of paper there.

It was a strange handwriting and very brief. "This is the note she left and it fastens his treachery upon him. I will wait until he comes and then there will be a scene. I have watched you for some time, Talbot, and woe to you now! That you belong to the Clan is made clear, and I shall fight you as I would its mistress."

He waited for Gold Button with eagerness tugging at his heart, but the moments slipped away and he did not come.

The Man in the Satin Mask showed by his blazing eyes that he was more than anxious to look upon the man who had played spy in his own house. He had been unmasked; the Queen of the Clan—the woman who had fought him with a deadly poison—had him in her employ and he, Talbot, had helped him down the road of doom.

What would he do with Talbot when he came? Should he blow his brains out without telling him why, or would it be best to force a confession from him and then deliberately take his life?

The hour of midnight came, but Talbot did not.

Had Norah found him? Had the Queen of the Gray Clan warned the private secretary, and had he seen Talbot for the last time?

Haliday Hood looked at the clock and saw the hands pointing to one.

At last he went to his room, but left the door ajar so that he might hear any sound indicative of Gold Button's return.

But he fell asleep. He passed into a deep slumber which was not broken by the man who slipped across the velvet carpet and entered the library where he bent over the desk and took some papers from it.

Talbot, the man with the red scar, had come back. He had entered the house like a thief and the wearer of the mask slept on unconscious of the visit.

Having plundered the desk of what he sought, the spy glided to Hood's sleeping chamber and stepped across its threshold.

He leaned over the couch and looked at the man thereon. The mask lay lightly on his face,

but the breathing of the sleeper was not interrupted thereby.

A malicious grin overspread Talbot's face while he studied the one before him.

He took from his pocket a vial and with it in his hand dropped several drops of its contents upon the light fabric near the sleeper's lips.

Then he stole from the room as softly as he had entered and at the door turned and took a farewell look at the Man in the Mask.

With the tread of the cat he went out. There was something about him which told that he was quitting the house for good. He must have encountered the woman called Norah: he must have been warned that a man tiger was waiting for him where he had served as spy and secretary.

To go back to that house when Haliday Hood was awake meant an accusation, if not death. He knew the man whom he had watched; he had studied him during the months he had been under his roof and he was not liable to mistake his nature.

Half an hour later Gold Button turned up in another part of Gotham, and in a room where he sat alone smoking and alternately looking over some papers which he had taken from a drawer.

He was interrupted by a step, and looking up he beheld Carter sinking into a chair opposite him.

There was a queer look in Carter's eyes and for a moment neither of the men spoke.

"Well?" growled Carter, "the woman has played the fool."

"Spira?"

"No, Gloria."

In an instant the escape of Mercy Sharp flashed across Talbot's mind and he thought of the woman he had seen at the letter-box.

"I know that Toby Sharp's wife is at large," he said. "Gloria was to have kept her at all hazards; but she is out."

"I don't mean that. She had the ferret in a trap; she stood face to face with Velvet Van, the shadow-sharp of the streets. Stood face to face with him, I tell you—held two revolvers at his head and had him completely at her mercy—"

"And let him go?" cried Talbot, leaning across the table with anxiety and anger mingled in his eyes.

"She shot, of course. She shot with one of the revolvers almost touching the detective's face, but—"

"Missed him?"

"Missed him!"

For a second the two men sat silent in the little room.

Carter was the first to speak.

"You know what will happen now unless that man is successfully trapped."

"I ought to know, but with the Clan against him—"

"What cares he for the Clan?" broke in Carter. "He is one of the shrewdest and has sworn to break it up and play havoc with the game we are at."

"All oaths are not fulfilled."

"I know that, but here is the ferret alive, and with the snuke of one of our weapons still in his face you might say."

"Yes."

"And you have left the Satin Mask?"

"Who told you?"

"Rene."

Norah was sometimes called Rene by the members of the Gray Clan.

"You saw her, then? It was the closest call of my life. If I had not met Norah I would have gone back with that man waiting for me with the devil in his eye. I would have walked straight to doom, for he would not have given me a minute's grace. Yes, I dare not go back there, but the heaven will work all the same."

"He can't break the force of the drug; but he may show his teeth, wolf-like, before the end comes."

"A futile show," said Talbot. "But what have you done with Spira?"

"I have found where she is."

"At the cripple's?"

"Yes."

"You don't want to lose sight of her. To lose her—to let that woman get in her work—is to lose a winning card. Carter, you must take care of Spira, the traitress."

"I intend to, but—"

The speaker looked at Talbot and stopped.

"See here," he went on. "I am going to play another hand. I have made another discovery."

"Ha!"

"There is the dream-child in old Ramon's house."

"Juno?"

"Juno! Why not get her and have her dream for us?"

Gold Button laughed at the proposition.

"In the first place old Ramon is a man of means. He hasn't been making springs all his life. He came to the den with a mint of money and would not part with the girl for every dollar of it."

"That may be."

"Don't you see we could have two strings to our bow? There is a cool ten thousand in that girl. You know Toby Sharp refused to the last to give up his secret; you know that Rene wanted him to surrender it to her and her alone, and refusing, he felt the death-grip of the Clan."

Talbot nodded.

"Why, man, that is blackmail," he said. "You don't want to get hold of the secret which should belong to Norah and no one else, do you?"

"I want about ten thousand," grated Carter.

"You want to get hold of the child dreamer of old Ramon's den and have her dream for you?"

"There's no telling how far the child can carry her mysterious gift."

"It might cost something to get hold of her."

"Fudge!" cried Carter in derision. "I know something about the interior of the old man's house. I know the stairs that lead to her room, and with that wonderful child in our power, we need not wait for the end of the Man in the Mask."

Talbot said nothing, but looked across the table at the eager Carter whose face was aglow with the effect of his proposition.

"You overlook one thing, man," said he at length.

"What is that?"

"The vengeance of our Queen."

The lip of Carter curled derisively for an instant.

"You can't sneer down the fact that she is the coolest and most dangerous creature in this country. You have not seen what I have been witnessing for months; you have not followed step by step the secret workings of her hands. You don't know how a man dies when the hand of the Gray Clan has touched him."

"I know that a good deal of what she does is fudge," cried Carter. "Don't you see that, with Mercy Sharp at large and the ferret still on the trail, we have to do something for number one?"

"Do what you please, but I warn you that if you disobey the commands of the Clan—if you try to set a game for yourself—you will live to regret it. Let the dream-child alone."

Carter said nothing more and shortly afterward rose to go.

"I have warned you," said Talbot, looking up at him as he stood by the door. "You must go back to your duty."

"What if Spira has told this ferret all?"

"That makes no difference. She is doomed just the same."

"What if Mercy Sharp divulges the story of her adventures?"

"She can locate no one."

"You are bound to meet me at every point," smiled Carter. "I see that."

"I don't want to see you make a fool of yourself for a little money."

There was no answer to this and Carter crossed the step and was gone.

"There is more danger in that person than in all the others," exclaimed Talbot when the door had shut on the man. "He is on the eve of playing a hand of his own. It must not be done. Old Ramon must not be disturbed; the time has not come for that."

He followed Carter out, but did not look for him on the streets.

Soon afterward he stood face to face with Norah, the Queen of the Gray Clan, in her mansion on the avenue.

"The fool wants to die," she said in her clear voice, which was not at any time excitable. "Gloria has just been here. She has told me about the meeting in the old house. She fired point blank into the ferret's face."

"And missed him!"

The woman started.

"No, it cannot be. Gloria is now in this house."

She lifted her hand and rung a bell.

In a little while the sound of footsteps approached the room, and the woman who had faced Velvet Van came in.

"Do you know what this man says?" said Norah, nodding toward Talbot. "You failed to kill."

All at once the woman called Gloria the Gloved sprang at Talbot and wildly clutched his arm.

"I could not have missed at that distance. Why, the weapon almost touched his face. It is impossible!"

"Carter says you missed."

"Carter, the liar?"

"Go and see," quietly said the head of the Clan.

A woman crept down the street and gained the scene of the encounter with the detective.

She glided into the same room and struck a match.

"My God!" she cried, falling back as the match fell from her hands.

She was the only person in the room.

Velvet Van, the man-hunter, had vanished!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SHADOWER'S TRAIL.

GLORIA THE GLOVED stood for a little while

in the dark, for her match had gone out, and she could not see her hands before her face.

"It seems impossible, and yet I may have missed him," she said at last. "I remember now that the child was falling from its crib, and that may have destroyed my aim. Gone! Still on the trail, and more than ever on the alert. It is my accursed fault. Shall I go back to Rene and confess? Why not take the child and hide—get out of the way of all? There are places where she would never look for me. I know a den where I could hide, and she would not think of looking there, for Gloria, the Gloved."

The woman stood between two horns of an unpleasant dilemma.

She crept from the house without lighting another match.

Back she went to the house she had left, but the Queen of the Gray Clan did not see her enter.

Stealing to one of the rooms, she lifted a babe from a couch and stole down-stairs with it in her arms.

Gloria the Gloved had made up her mind to bury herself from the sight of all who might look for her. The man at whom she had fired for the Clan and the head of the Order itself, should never discover her and the child she carried in her bosom.

Meantime the man of trails, who had been missed by a miracle, though the wind of the bullet had thrown him to the floor, was at work. It was not his way to let a trail grow cold when once struck.

He found the house empty when he recovered from the effects of Gloria's shot.

He discovered that one of the upper rooms had sheltered some one else, and a clew picked up there told him that that person was Mercy Sharp, the widow.

Velvet Van went back to his office, but not for long.

He turned his face once more to the den of old Ramon, the spring-maker; but this time he was not to consult the dream-child Juno.

He had business with the old man himself.

Ramon Ravenclaw looked up from his work and met the gaze of the detective with a frown.

"You can't see the child write to-night. She is unwell."

"I am not here for that purpose. I want to see you, Ramon."

"Me?"

"You," and the ferret drew a stool close to where the old man worked and looked squarely at him.

"Did you ever save a copy of your marriage certificate?"

The question was a shock.

The maker of springs fell back, his mouth open and his face the picture of surprise.

"I am here for the facts. The time has come for them," the detective went on. "You don't expect me to work in the dark? I want to know if you ever saved your marriage-certificate."

Ramon Ravenclaw seemed to shrink from the man who watched him like a hawk; he tried to remain cool and to show his coolness, picked up his little hammer, but did not hold steadily.

"Who told you that I was ever married?" he stammered at last.

"Never mind that. You have not answered my question."

"What if I should refuse?"

"Do just what you please," smiled Velvet Van. "I am after the Gray Clan; I am looking into something else besides the murder of Toby Sharp. I am on the track of a double mystery and you can help me."

"By telling you something of my past life?"

"By answering my question."

Old Ramon drew a long breath.

"I saved it," he said.

"And it is in this house?"

The spring-maker slipped from his chair and crossed the room.

He disappeared beyond the door, leaving the detective alone. Presently he came back, carrying in his hand a dirty envelope which he gripped as if it were gold.

"It is here," he said. "I haven't looked at it in years, but here is where I have kept it and—"

He opened the envelope and looked into it.

At that moment the detective looked toward the window, recalling the eye he had seen there on a former visit.

"Let me see it," he said, putting out his hand for the envelope. "I want all the clews I can get—"

"But this can have nothing to do with Toby Sharp!" cried old Ramon.

"You don't know."

The ferret took the envelope and shook out of it several papers, at which he glanced as they fell into his lap.

"Which one is it, Ramon?"

The old man's hand made a dart for the heap, but the next moment he dropped them all and sunk back with a cry of despair.

"It has been stolen!"

"Come, you haven't looked at what is here. You haven't even touched the pile."

"But I know how it looks without that. It was there when I looked last—"

"When was that?"

"Years ago."

"But a good many things have happened since then."

There was no answer. Old Ramon, almost white, sat in the chair near the ferret and gasped.

"I will track it through Juno," he suddenly cried. "I will find that paper, for I can use it by and by when they have won the game."

"When who have won the game, Ramon?" questioned the detective.

The spring-maker started.

"Come, old fellow. You will betray yourself if you don't look out. If the certificate is lost you will tell me something."

Ramon sat stolid in the chair.

"I can't tell any one the secret I have been keeping so long," he replied. "I dare not tell it to you."

"Because I am what I am?"

"I almost hate men of your calling. But for you, I would not have the strange waking spells that have come over me of late. I could sleep well—"

"You don't sleep at all, and all because you are so eager to see that Juno doesn't leave something damaging on the black-board."

"What could she write against me?" whined old Ramon.

"What was she writing when your hand wiped it out?" answered the detective.

The hands of the spring-maker began to gather up the late contents of the dirty envelope. They were watched by the ferret who smiled at the way they shook, and when the last paper had been returned to its place, he said:

"You can begin now, Ramon. I have a little time on my hands."

There was no reply. The face of the old man was a study and his eyes gazed at Velvet Van, blinking now and then like the orbs of an owl.

"You didn't marry her for love, eh, Ramon?" Silence.

"There was something else in view, and if she really loved you—"

"Peste! she never did that," cried the old man. "She hated me from the last words of the priest."

"But she drew you into her net and you made her your wife—gave her your name and then surrendered to her all the knowledge you possessed on a certain subject?"

"She stole that!"

"Well, go on."

"Do you want me to tell you everything? Did you come to me to get me to go back into the past and dig up some secrets which can do you no good? Toby Sharp is dead and you say you are on the trail of the hands that took his life, yet here you are, asking me about my wife."

"Very well; you can stop where you are, Ramon," said Velvet Van, with a smile. "I won't go a step further; but you must not blame me if I get the information from another quarter."

"It might be dangerous."

"I will take the risk."

"Take it!"

Old Ramon settled back to work. That is, he picked up the little hammer and seemed to forget that he had a visitor who was eyeing him from a spot not three feet away.

All at once the door back of the spring-maker opened and the detective saw the figure of Juno glide into the room.

The child was pale, but not sickly looking, and with her lustrous eyes wide open in the strange trance, she walked to the black-board and put up one hand.

That instant Ramon caught sight of her and made a move to drive her from her self-imposed task, but the hand of Velvet Van gripped his wrist and held him down to his chair.

"You must not interfere with Juno," said the ferret in low tones. "You have been telling her something again and she shall write it out without interruption."

The chalk in the child's hand was already at work, and the two men were watching her, but with different emotions.

The eyes of Papa Ramon were like those of a tiger; they fairly blazed with rage and the detective felt his pulse as it rose high under the power of excitement.

"That is a lie!" grated Ramon, glaring at the sentences that were falling from Juno's chalk. "I never put her upon that sort of trail for I knew nothing—"

"Hush! You must not rouse her until she has finished."

"But I swear—"

The face of the detective went toward the old spring-maker and he almost hissed:

"If you open your head again I will take you with me when I go out. Let the girl tell her dream. She is almost done and you shall not break the spell."

After this there was no interruption and Juno wrote on until she fell back and turned to the door.

"My curses go with her!" growled Ramon, gazing after her. "What she has left on that board is a lie."

"You know better. You know that every word is true and that Juno has simply taken up the trail of the last story you told her."

What was on the black-board? What had the girl left behind her which so aroused the ire of her guardian, and why had the detective of Gotham been so anxious to have her complete her work?

"I see the paper in the hands of a woman who lives in a fine house. She is looking at it and clutches her hands. She holds it in the fire and I go closer and read on it as it burns the name of Ivan Ravenclaw. I see in the woman's lap another paper which she takes up as she destroys the first one. It is a confession, for it is headed that way—the confession of Ivan Ravenclaw. She reads it, but does not destroy it like the other one. The last paper she puts away."

These were the words which the hand of Juno the Child-Wonder left on the blackboard ere she left the room.

"You say you never made a confession, do you?" asked the detective.

The face of Papa Ramon was tensely drawn and his hands had shut like vises.

"You don't want to lie," continued Velvet Van. "You were once the husband of the woman who burned the marriage-certificate you say you have lost. You know that Toby Sharp witnessed that marriage. You know that the Man in the Satin Mask was there; that he kept a record of that event. Papa Ramon, you also know who Juno is. You are not a blockhead by any manner of means. Keep your secrets if you can."

The old wretch looked up. His hands unclasped slowly like a serpent unwinds its folds.

He looked at the ferret, but did not open his mouth.

"You heard me?" said Velvet Van. "You may obliterate the writing on the board for you know there are other eyes in this house. But you can't blot out the facts disclosed there. You told Juno about the marriage; but did not bring yourself into it. You see that she dreamt out the truth—that unwittingly she discovered the fate of the missing certificate. I will go back to the trail now?"

Old Ramon sprung to his feet.

"And you will tell the world that I was at one time that creature's husband?" he cried.

"I intend to disclose the whole of the Toby Sharp mystery, and if it reaches you, Ramon—if it brings to light your own matrimonial episode—"

"By the eternal heavens, I will hunt you! Beware!"

The look of the old spring-maker was the look of a fiend.

Velvet Van fell back and reached the door. All at once Papa Ramon leaped to the blackboard and one sweep of his sleeve blotted out the writing there.

"I will play a hand he doesn't look for!" cried Ramon, under his breath. "I will show him that Papa Ramon is as sharp as the sharpest. I can outwit the best clew-hunters in the city. He is no match for me, for I have lost none of my cunning while hammering out springs for the nabobs' watches!" and the shadow-sharp heard without guessing its meaning, the laugh that followed his exit from the den.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DARK COMPACTS.

CARTER, the man delegated to watch Spira the traitress, went doggedly to the trail.

He was out of humor because Gold Button had refused to enter into the scheme to get possession of Juno, the dream-child, and by the aid of her startling powers get hold of a secret which he believed would net them at least ten thousand dollars.

Nick Carter knew that Spira had gone back to the cripple who was her brother, though this was not very well known.

He was not sure that she had found the detective to whom she had declared she would divulge her secret; but he had no doubt, desperate as he knew her to be, that she would carry out her threat at the first opportunity.

The man on Spira's track was a man calculated to give her a good deal of trouble, but she kept indoors so long as to lead him to suspect that she had made her escape from the city.

After his interview with Gold Button, who had been discovered as a spy in the house of the Man with the Satin Mask, Carter hung around the cripple's abode in hopes of finding Spira.

If he had thought that his mission was more than suspected by Velvet Van he would have shown more caution, but such was not the case.

Spira had been warned by the ferret and seemed disposed to keep herself concealed for a certain time, for, as she had left the Clan and had told the Shadower all she knew, she would be hunted by Norah and her spies who would not leave a single stone unturned in the chase.

Carter at last thought he had been rewarded for his zeal, for he saw a figure emerge from the house and slip away.

Of course he followed.

It was a woman, and she led him through the shadows of early evening to a spot near the Battery.

It was Spira, there was no doubt of it, and he

kept at her heels as near as he dared and wondered whither she could be going.

All at once she turned and came back.

Carter had time to dodge into a doorway and watched her pass.

His fingers itched to catch her, but he held back and once more threw himself upon her trail.

"I have her now!" he said, seeing her enter a house within sight of the river. "She went there once before and I found out how to get into the place."

Carter, something of a burglar, went to the rear of the place and effected an entrance.

He stood within the house and listened. No noise reached his ears, but he felt assured that Spira was within his grasp.

"Gold Button would not join me in the strike for the ten thousand, why not try this woman?" he said. "She is cool and wants the cash like the rest of us. I know she failed to carry out the order of the Clan when she went out of Ramon's den; but this is a horse of another color. There is no dagger in this play."

He crept deeper into the house and at last entered a room, from a chair in which the woman he had tracked sprung with a quick cry.

The next instant she had placed herself on the defensive and her hand gripped a dagger the point of which was turned threateningly toward Carter.

"You don't want to use that thing on me, woman. I don't intend to harm you if you treat me right. There's a million in the proposition I have to make. You don't know but I have left the Clan."

She laughed.

"I know you are its paid tracker and that you have been watching me," she said. "You quit the Gray Clan? Yes, when a rope swings you over the law's trap!"

"Not quite so fast. I think the same rope would give some one else a swing if the truth was known."

"I am not afraid of that now."

"But you were once and not very long ago, either. Come, Spira: we ought to come together and there is a big divide if you will join me."

She could not believe him, for had he not hunted her down to find her in that house to which she had come for the purpose of meeting some one who was interested in the mystery of Toby Sharp?

She threatened him again with the point of the dagger, but he did not quail.

"You have told the ferret?" he went on.

"I have told the ferret," was the defiant rejoinder.

"I think you were hasty, but we can work our game just the same!"

"Our game? What do you mean?"

The point of the dagger had dropped a little and she was looking at him with some curiosity.

With the confidence and coolness for which he was noted, Carter unfolded his scheme. He saw how closely Spira listened to every word and when he had reached the end of his tale, she smiled.

"It's a pretty plot."

"There's ten thousand in it."

"But it puts the whole Clan against us."

"Don't you see the power it gives us? The child can write out on the black-board the dreams she has and we know enough to start her on some interesting trails."

Carter could not see for the shadows in the room the passion that seemed to control the woman before him. She was trying to beat down her real feelings for fear of betraying them to the rascal who had come to her with a proposition which was as infamous as any ever made by man.

Juno was to be stolen and worked for money. She was to dream for Nick Carter and permit him to hold her revelations over the head of Norah of the Gray Clan for the purpose of enriching him.

"You will make nothing by your bargain with the detective," said Carter. "These men never divide, but use their informants to line their own pockets. There is nothing in your present course for you, and without a club over the head of Norah and the Clan don't you see that you are powerless and in the shadow of death?"

"There is something in that."

"There is everything in it. You can't struggle against the deadly drugs which Rene dispenses to her enemies. Why, the detective himself is powerless to save you, though he has doubtless promised you help."

"I know, of course, that I would be hunted all the same."

"Hunted to the death," said Carter.

"I have this woman," he thought. "I have an ally now, and she will enter into the plot to get hold of the child dreamer, and we shall reap a golden harvest."

"I will do the work," he continued. "I will see that old Ramon is suddenly despoiled of the Child Wonder, and that she works for us hereafter."

"And I—"

"Oh, you need do nothing but guard her, and see that she is well taken care of. You will be a mother to her and watch over her."

"I will promise to do no more than that."

Carter had won. His eyes glowed brightly, and his blood ran leaping through his veins.

The rest of the compact was easy.

Spira agreed to help him in the plot which he said could not fail. She would be throwing a hunter off her track, and she need not refrain from occasional trips to the street, for with Carter in league with her, she would not have his keen eyes watching her.

"When will you do the work?" she asked, eagerly.

"To-night."

"And the home of Juno and I—"

"The house I sometimes inhabit under another name. I have been living a life not all of which is known to the Clan; I am another gentleman in another part of the city. You will be safe there, and before midnight Juno, the Child Dreamer, will be your companion."

The compact made, Nick Carter stole from the house, leaving Spira to follow him after a certain interval. He was in high glee. What Gold Button had refused to do the woman had agreed to perform, and she was cool and keen.

Carter glanced often at his watch during the hours that moved by on leaden wings. He had set the time for the sloop upon Papa Ramon's den, and only wanted the hour to come for the attempt.

Spira made her way to the house which he had mentioned. She carried a key which he said would give her entrance, and her figure was lost among the shadows of the pave.

Nick Carter turned up in the vicinity of Papa Ramon's abode at the time he had set for the play. He drew near the old house, and going to the window, where Velvet Van had seen the eye, he looked into the room.

Instead of seeing Papa Ramon, he saw nothing, for all was dark inside.

"That's funny," muttered the child-hunter. "I never saw it that way before and I have looked into that room a score of times. What has become of Papa Ramon anyhow?"

He crept to the rear of the den and effected an entrance. He crawled to the door which opened into the den itself and opened it. A light was still.

Groping his way to the work-bench, he felt for the tools usually found there, but found them not.

"Great Caesar! there's something wrong here."

Carter struck a match and held it above his head.

"Gone!" he cried.

The work-bench had been cleared and the stool which the old man used to occupy had been robbed of its cushion.

Carter's eyes seemed to bulge from his head.

He turned from the den and rushed up the steps in the hall. He dashed into a room at the head of the flight and struck another match there.

No one greeted him.

"Too late! A thousand curses on the head of the old demon. He has run off with the Child Wonder. I have played my hand a few minutes too late. But what made him go? He could not have learned of our game; no it was not that. Did he fear the Clan? Was the child dreaming too much for him?"

The baffled thief turned back and went downstairs.

All at once he stopped in the dark.

A door had opened and he knew that some one was in the next room and the one between him and the door.

Rendered desperate by this sudden discovery, Carter fell back and drew a knife in the darkness.

Maybe old Ramon had come back for something, or perhaps the man he did not want to see in that house—Velvet Van, the detective—was about to confront him.

Carter with drawn dagger waited for the door to open. He felt that he was about to stand face to face with some one, but with whom?

The click of a latch struck his ears and he gripped the knife firmer than ever. He had made up his mind that Velvet Van should not close in on him in that place.

The portal was open now and some one entered the room.

Carter ceased breathing. He leaned forward, trying to pierce the gloom and locate the invader.

Suddenly he heard an exclamation of wonder and then a match was drawn across the wall. As the little flame leaped up he went back with a start.

"Jerusalem! what brought you hither?" he cried.

There was a start and a cry and he saw the blanched face of the woman he had lately left—Spira, the traitress of the Gray Clan.

Her astonishment was as great as his.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DIAMOND AND DIAMOND.

VELVET VAN stood on the pier and appeared to be watching the swish of the waves as they beat against the soddened planks.

He knew nothing of the drama being enacted in old Ramon's house, for he had another mis-

sion and his eyes were watching a figure that had come down to the river with the soft tread of a cat.

There it had stood for some time, not watching the waves as he appeared to be doing, but apparently waiting for some one expected from across the dark stream.

Presently along came a puffing boat, and the figure eyed by the detective moved a little from the shadows.

"You have followed them?" said the person on the watch.

"I have tracked them down. It was no great trouble, for I never let them get away for a moment. I have them safe and sound and they think they were not tracked."

The two went back together, and the one who had come from across the river turned off at a corner, while the other—a woman—entered a carriage which had waited and was driven off.

"So much for the conference on the pier," said the ferret, turning after the man who was walking off. "He was tracking some one. This is the man with the scar—the person seen on several occasions by Mercy Sharp. Now for my old friend Nixon."

Once more, as "Colonel Orchid," he moved toward the house where he had on several occasions met Halliday Hood in his role of Nathan Nixon.

He had not played the role of Colonel Orchid for some nights and was anxious to see how the Man of the Satin Mask had fared since the last interview.

He entered the house by a key which he carried and stopped in the hall.

The Satin Mask was there. Nixon had come down, as he afterward said, hoping to hear a report from his ferret, but did not expect to meet Colonel Orchid instead.

Halliday Hood had a stranger look than ever. There was a deeper desire in his eyes than before, and the detective, who knew nothing of his encounter with Norah the Queen of the Clan, wondered if it was the workings of the deadly drug.

"Well, how do you like your ferret?" asked Velvet Van.

"I haven't given him a fair trial; but he promises well."

"He promises so and so, eh?"

"He and I will get along if he attends to my business, but the moment he gets beyond that, let him look out."

"He is one of those men who will hunt the guilty down no matter where the trail leads."

"I believe it."

"He will discover the hidden if it convicts his friends."

"Curse him, he may bring them into peril. I don't like him on that account."

The detective smiled.

"You have not seen him to-night?" asked the Satin Mask.

"Nor for several nights."

"I warned him—told him that traps would be set for him and that he would have to look out."

"He will do that."

Hood's hands wandered listlessly to a pack of cards and he began to shuffle the deck with a strange look at Velvet Van.

"Do you know that you have eyes nearly like the detective's?" he suddenly asked.

"Others have marked the resemblance before you," he replied with a careless laugh. "I have been taken for Van Cue by parties looking for him, but I have always proved my identity."

"There are some singular resemblances in this world," and the Man in the Satin Mask threw down the deck. "I used to know a man who looked so much like me that we were sometimes taken for brothers though there was not the least relationship. I'm glad you dropped in. The detective may come and I will hear what he has to say."

Velvet Van withdrew and in thirty minutes was back, but in the other garb.

"I had hopes you would drop in," cried Hood at sight of him and his languid eyes brightened. "You look as though you have been on the trail. Well, does the shadow of the Gray Clan fall across your path?"

"Not quite so much as another shadow does," was the answer.

In an instant the face of the man changed.

"You have been hunting, then?"

"Yes."

"You have been upon the trail of the hand that took the life of Toby Sharp?"

"That was my quest, you remember, before you called me to your assistance."

"I have not forgotten."

Halliday Hood waited for the detective to proceed, but as he remained silent, he continued:

"I wish you would quit the trail of your mystery long enough to do some hot work for me," he said. "I want to know if a certain woman is living or dead."

"An enemy?"

"Of course. I have no friends."

The reply was accompanied by a grim smile.

"I am desirous of knowing whether the Queen of the Gray Clan still breathes the air in her mansion."

"Rene?"

"Ah, I see you have the name pat, though

they generally call her Norah. This woman has been in my house."

"To see you?"

"Why not? She came with the coolness of a Borgia but I was prepared for her. Gods! you should have been present at the interview."

Velvet Van was astounded at Rene's daring.

"I gave her a dose of her own medicine. I gave her a draught warranted to kill quicker than the drug I have felt these months of torture in my own system. She drank it down."

The Man in the Satin Mask was laughing over the scene at his house, but he continued:

"I measured her life—told her that she had but three minutes of grace. Did she falter? That woman never falters! Down went the draught and out of doors darted the cool creature of the Clan."

"Alive?"

"Of course! I watched her out of sight expecting to see her drop dead near the corner, but she whisked herself away and I heard the noise of wheels. She had a carriage in waiting, and that was the end of my adventure. Now, I want to know if the house on X—street holds the living body of the woman of the league."

The detective said nothing for a moment after the startling narrative.

"I will find out for you," he answered. "That she should carry home in her system a poison deadly enough to kill its victims in three minutes is almost incredible."

"I was a fool for not letting her die in my house. Then I could have shown Talbot something worth looking at when he came in. There was a time when this woman would not have sprung from the house and made off. But she is playing a cool hand now, and, with the drug in my veins, she did not want to perish where I stood the victor."

"Certainly not."

Hood drummed softly on the table with his long nails.

"By the way, what ever became of her husband?" asked Velvet Van.

"Of whose husband?"

"Rene's."

"Who told you that she ever had one?"

The tiger eyes of the Man in the Satin Mask were burning on the opposite side of the table, and the hands which had dropped to his hips were sinking their nails into the palms.

"Do you think I know everything?" he asked.

"I merely asked. We man-hunters sometimes make interesting discoveries."

"But how came you to find out that Rene ever had a lord and master?"

"You don't know what surprises await one on the Toby Sharp trail. It might be that I ought to know the truth about this marriage before I can do anything satisfactory. If her husband is dead, why—"

"Do you think he is dead?" broke in Hood.

"You ought to know."

"I?" and the speaker fell back and looked into the face that confronted him.

"A truce to all this," said Velvet Van. "I am coming to the point and you can do as you please—withhold your answer or tell me what I want to know."

There was no reply. The eyes across the table were a deadly challenge.

"The woman has destroyed the marriage-certificate—"

"When did she get hold of it?"

"Never mind that; she has burned it, I say, but the confession she has kept."

"The deuce she has!"

"Now, what brought about that strange marriage?"

A smile crossed Halliday Hood's face.

"Is that what you want me to answer?" he said.

"That is it."

"What brought about that marriage, eh? You should have asked who made the match."

He laughed till his eyes sparkled.

"I made it," he went on. "I am the maker of that match."

Velvet Van did not move, but gazed into the face of the Satin Mask and watched it steadily.

"So you made it, did you? You know what became of Rene's husband, for, having made a match of that nature, you would not be likely to lose sight of him."

"Of course not."

"Did she turn on you because you made the match?" queried the ferret.

"Perhaps."

"And is that why you tell me that your time is measured?"

"That is why."

"Then, why didn't she finish off her husband if there was no love in the affair?"

"Ho, ho!" laughed the Man in the Satin Mask. "There are some things you have failed to discover, though I give you credit for being a number one detective. Find that husband—"

"Maybe I have found him."

"You? Why, man, he left the city long ago. He slipped away between two days, and some time later a body was fished out of the river just like Toby Sharp was, and I saw it."

That was all. The lips of the Satin Mask closed behind the last words as if they intended to say no more.

"Is that all?" asked Velvet Van.

"That is all. I hired you to solve the mysteries of this trail by cunning. I did not engage to go upon the witness-stand myself, and you have been warned that the moment you hunt Halliday Hood instead of serving Nixon, you make a mistake."

The eye of the shadow-sharp did not drop beneath the speaker's scrutiny.

"Then, know this, Hood or Nixon—I care not which. I have the husband of Norah of the Clan under my hand, and I know why you made that infamous match."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BUTTON IN THE WALL.

THE Mystery-Shadower had no need to go to the house inhabited by Norah of the Gray Clan to see what had become of the cool-headed woman who took the poison in Halliday Hood's mansion.

He was satisfied that she had survived the draught, and that the Man in the Satin Mask was likely to hear from her again.

Norah was alive and as clever-witted as ever.

While Velvet Van was holding his interview with Hood, she was at home with a smile on her white face and all alone.

More than twenty times in as many minutes she glanced toward the door, but the person looked for did not come, and she left the room with mutterings which proved that she was not in the best of humor.

The Queen of the Clan went out and, disguised, traversed several rather dark streets to pull up at last in front of a house which did not bear the slightest resemblance to the elegant one she occupied.

It was a house of strange doors and secret buttons, for touching one of the latter set in the wall, a portal opened slowly and Norah disappeared.

She turned up in a small room, the sides of which were curiously papered with cabalistic figures.

A writing-table stood in the middle of this apartment, and the Queen of the League seated herself thereat.

"If Gloria missed the detective, he will stick to the trail and bring all his cunning to the task before him," she said, speaking aloud as her hand poised itself above the writing materials she had taken from a drawer. "In the first place, he must be netted; this cool-headed Mystery-Shadower must feel the hand of the Gray Clan, for I care not how well we play our hand, we may be tripped up by him if left alone. I begin the work here. Gloria's hand must have trembled ere she touched the trigger, and the weapon, varying a hair's breadth, brought about the failure."

She wrote for a few moments and sealed what she had written.

It seemed as though she was the sole occupant of the house. Not a sound disturbed her while at work, but she had barely finished her task ere a noise fell upon her ears.

Norah looked up and watched the spot where the secret door stood.

It swung open by degrees and a pair of eyes looked in upon her.

In an instant the hand of Norah rose above the table, and she had covered the face with a pistol.

"Come in," she said, glaring at the eyes that met her gaze. "Come in, or die where you are!"

There was no response for a second, and then the owner of the face stepped into the room.

It was Spira!

Norah looked into the woman's face, and then fell back with a curious smile.

"What brought you hither?" she said. "You are a traitress and deserve to die."

"I know I did not carry out the commands of the Clan—"

"Your courage failed you, eh?"

"I will say yes if that will do you any good."

There was nerve in the look Spira gave her old mistress. Her voice did not tremble.

"What do you want?"

Spira seemed to lean toward the revolver still clutched by Queen Norah's hand.

"I would not have entered this house if I did not want something. I tracked you hither—"

"You were playing spy against the Clan, were you? Woman, do you remember the provisions and penalties of the code?"

A slight tremor seemed to pass over Spira's frame.

"Just as if I could forget them!" she replied.

"Of course I know what they are. But I am here to know what has become of Papa Ramon and his household."

Norah laughed.

"Don't you think you have come to the wrong place for information of that sort? How should I know anything about the old man's affairs? Has he moved?"

"You know he has and that is why I am here."

"What do you want of him? Have you got some of your courage back, and are you willing to go to work and redeem the past by remaining true to the Clan?"

Spira shook her head.

"I don't know what became of old Ramon and I can't see what he is to you unless you have concluded to go back to the trail and carry out the commands of the Clan."

"I could not kill Muriel."

"You could not, eh? And why not?"

"She was so beautiful and unsuspecting."

"Ha, ha! she weakened you with her beauty did she?" laughed Norah.

No answer.

The hands of Spira half buried in the folds of her dress were tightly clinched and the long hairs were sunk into the palms.

"You carried out the commands of the Clan up to that night. You never let beauty stand between you and duty before and you always came back with some of your old nerve; but this time you ran and hid because the victim walked to the point of the needle without suspecting your presence."

"You must expect me to do all the work."

"Then, you should not come to me for information. There are others who are liable to know as much about this Papa Ramon as myself. You seem to forget that I am in the house of nights and if he went off after dark, I would not be on the watch."

Spira said nothing for a moment, but all at once her right hand came up over the edge of the table and rested there. Norah fixed her eyes upon it.

"You have no regard for a mother's yearnings," she said through lips almost welded. "You refuse to tell me what has become of Papa Ramon, the old spring-maker and—"

"There!" cried Norah, looking fiercely at her. "You ask too much, woman. Why should I perform a single service for a traitress? Don't you think that you may never quit this house alive?"

The lips of Spira curled half defiantly.

"I know that you and the Clan are capable of many dark deeds; that I am not the only victim who has perished in its grip."

"That is right—not the only one."

"I want to know this one thing—I want to know what has become of old Ramon."

"Go out and find him."

"I cannot do that."

"Put the matter into the hands of the ferret with whom you seem to have united your fortunes."

The listening creature started.

"I know what you have done. You have told him a good many things. You have sat in Velvet Van's office and given him all the threads of the skein you had in your hands to give. You have broken your oath taken under the red cross of the Gray Clan; you have turned to our foes, and all because your courage failed you at a certain moment and the waxen beauty of a girl unnerved you."

"I will confess to all this."

"And yet you come to me with a request. You want to find old Ramon, the spring-maker? What is he to you, woman?"

"He is nothing."

"Well?"

"But the child is everything."

"What child?"

"Don't torture me," cried Spira, bending over the table. "You know what child. I mean Juno, the Dream-Wonder. She has disappeared along with Papa Ramon."

"Ran off with him, did she?"

"He evidently took her with him and I have lost track of the pair."

"What has become of Muriel?"

"I presume she went with them."

"But you don't know?"

"I don't know."

Norah seemed to study the white face of the woman who was looking down into her eyes while she glared at her.

"I can't afford to tell a traitress anything," she said at last.

"Then, you know but will not divulge their hiding place?"

"I have not said so."

The following moment Spira sprung back and stood erect midway between the table and the door.

"Keep it to yourself," she cried. "I will go on the trail myself and can find them. I will play the hand I can play."

"With the aid of this Mystery-Shadower of the city?"

The look Norah got was the only reply she received.

"Good-night," continued Spira after a pause and laid her hand on the button which worked the door.

But the door did not swing open. She pressed the button again and again, coloring deeply, and at last threw a look at cool-headed Norah to catch on her lips the semblance of a triumphant smile.

"Why don't you go?" asked Norah.

Once more the hand at the button pressed it, but with the same result.

"Woman, you have walked into a trap," she remarked as coolly as if dictating a letter. "You know something of the secrets of the Gray Clan, though I suppose not many of them remain out of the hands of the ferret. You are a prisoner in this house. You cannot get out until I open

the doors, and do you think I should do so for you?"

Spira fell back from the wall.

"You have me in your power so far as the doors are concerned, but you should know that the detective holds the secret and that the grip of the Clan upon me may prove dangerous to its existence."

A laugh broke over Queen Norah's lips.

"In what direction has the Toby Sharp mystery led this ferret of your acquaintance?" she went on. "Since you gave him some pointers, has he followed the body of the old fellow to the river and thence taken the back trail? Come, Spira, as you have but a short time to live, you might tell me some things that are little mysteries just now."

But a little while to live!

Spira knew what was concealed in those words. She knew the hand of the woman before her knew that she was mistress of the deadly poison of the tropics and that in that very house was a room which she (Spira) had never invaded.

"I tell nothing," she said. "I will not betray the man who will avenge me and sift to the bottom the mystery of Toby Sharp."

"You won't, eh?"

The answer was another look.

Norah of the Clan pushed back her chair and crossed the room watched hawk-like by the woman standing near the wall.

She did not look again at Spira until she had reached the opposite side of the chamber. Halting there, she raised her hand and placed it on one of the strange figures in the paper.

"You won't tell, eh?" and she looked over her shoulder at the person who had regarded her.

"What I am to-night—traitress and wretch—I owe to you," exclaimed Spira and her hand covered the cool woman who had spoken last.

"I was happy till I fell into the toils of the Gray Clan. I had hopes of Heaven and looked ahead to a time when I could sit in peace in a happy home and fold to my bosom—"

The sudden wave of Norah's hand checked her in the midst of a sentence.

"No sermons here!" sternly cried the Queen of the Clan. "Are you going to tell me what you told the detective? That is what I want to know. You profess to have a motherly feeling somewhere in your bosom, but you don't show it."

"And if I tell you will you divulge the hiding place of old Ramon and Juno?"

"I will consider that."

"Which means that you will let it remain a secret. Secret for secret!"

There was no answer, only the hand of Norah seemed to glue itself to a certain spot on the wall.

"You are going to kill me, for you believe that a dead mother tells no tales," continued Spira.

"That is right. Dead lips are the only silent ones that exist."

A powerful emotion seemed to take sudden possession of the traitress.

"Go on and do your work! Press the button which your hand touches at this moment, but know at the moment that I am dead there will step upon the trail an avenger who will not let the Clan balk him and who will not stop until he stands before the hands that took Toby Sharp out of the world. Your poisons can not baffle him. They may sap the life of the masked nabob on the avenue; they may play a deadly hand in the drama of crime which the Clan is playing now; but when you have pressed the button and I lie dead at your feet, the work of the stern-faced avenger begins."

Norah heard the woman through.

She looked across the room at Spira and her hand seemed to drop an inch along the wall.

"If I spare you will you tell all?"

"Not unless the telling of my secret reveals the hiding-place of Juno, the dream-child."

"The Clan must be above some things and one of these is dealing with those who have betrayed it," said Norah. "I refuse to deal with you!"

Once more the hand at the wall rose to where the fatal button was.

Spira, watching the fingers with the intensity of a doomed criminal, saw them sink into the wall as it were.

The next moment she heard a low sound at her back and looking around beheld a hole in the wall near the door.

There was something in this hole—something from which she fell back with a cry. It was put forward as she recoiled, and from it—it was exactly like a human hand—something like the spray from a perfume touched her face.

A shiver was seen to pass over the form of Spira, the traitress.

She uttered no cry, made no motion of resistance, but sunk limp and white at the feet of the Queen of the dread Gray Clan.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TUSSELE IN THE DARK.

If Velvet Van could have been a witness of these scenes he would have been in a position to have informed the wearer of the Satin Mask that Norah, or Rene, was very much alive, and

that she was likely to prove a dangerous quarry before the hunt had ended.

But the ferret of the city did not see Spira sink to the floor at the feet of the cool woman of the League; he was in a distant part of Gotham and on a trail which promised to be productive of results.

He, too, had discovered that the old house so long occupied by Ramon Ravenclaw was deserted and that nothing could be found of the old man and the child gifted with wonderful powers.

The Mystery-Shadower was looking at a man who, standing partially in the light of a lamp, bore a resemblance to the person he had seen meet Norah on the pier, and when that person moved he had the ferret at his heels.

Did Velvet Van expect that by dogging the footsteps of this person he would be able to solve the mystery of old Ramon's disappearance?

At any rate he kept after him, only to lose him at the mouth of an alley.

His experience in the house inhabited by Gloria the Gloved was fresh in his mind and he had resolved not to venture into another trap, though, knowing the Clan as he knew it, he was liable to be watched by its people and trapped at the first opportunity, this time for good.

The detective remained some little time near the alley, when a figure passed him.

It was the same man, but changed.

"Talbot, eh?" muttered Velvet Van, taking after him once more. "What is the late private secretary up to now?"

Gold Button led Velvet Van a good chase half-way across the city, when he dodged into another alley like the one from which he had emerged.

This time the ferret followed.

Talbot did not unlock a door and admit himself into a house, but sidled up to the front of one and drummed on the weather boarding with his knuckles.

In a moment a window overhead was raised and the shadow saw a head poked out.

After the head came a hand and something fell downward like a snow-flake.

Talbot caught this something adroitly and looked at it a second, then thrusting it into his pocket, he turned and came toward the detective.

Velvet Van barely had time to draw back when the man passed him and turned into the street.

He had noticed that Talbot wore gloves and that he was dressed like a gentleman.

The man of many trails kept after Talbot some distance and saw him hand a boy something which looked like the object that had been dropped from the window.

"Boy or man—which?" smiled the ferret as the boy ran off, leaving Talbot or Gold Button on the sidewalk.

He was anxious to see just what the boy had received, but still he did not care to lose sight of Gold Button just yet.

As he could not watch both, he concluded to let the boy go and turn his whole attention to the man of the Clan.

That this person who had been in Halliday Hood's employ, knew all the secrets of the dread Clan, including the taking off of Toby Sharp, there was not the slightest doubt in the ferret's mind. Talbot could unravel that mystery to the very letter, but he was not the person to turn against the Order and reveal that which would wipe it out of existence and destroy its power.

Gold Button seemed to have relieved his mind of a load by giving the boy the packet he had caught from the window in the alley, for he walked off whistling, and the detective could not help noticing his wonderful coolness.

All of a sudden the man watched so closely came back, as if he had forgotten something, and wanted to overtake the boy messenger.

The ferret came face to face with him!

There was no chance to escape the sudden look that gleamed in Talbot's eyes, and Velvet Van saw that if he was not actually recognized, there was suspicion afloat.

Talbot passed, still whistling his tune, but the moment he had reached a spot ten feet from Velvet Van, he threw a look over his shoulder which told all.

"He knows me!" thought the man of trails.

"He knows that I have been following him." Talbot turned the nearest corner, but the Shadower did not follow his example.

The private secretary dodged into the first dark hallway he could find, and one presented itself before he had gone far.

Standing in the dark, he took from his pocket a vial, and sprinkled something over the back of his right-hand glove.

When he had done this he leaned out of the doorway and looked down the street.

"He did not follow," said Talbot, with a grin. "Perhaps he thought best not to go too far. So he is on the trail; but he doesn't seem to get at the Toby Sharp mystery very fast."

At that moment a figure turned the corner regarded so closely by Gold Button, and the man of the Clan drew back like a wolf into the door of his den.

He looked up the steps, but could see nothing

for the gloom that prevailed, and the building seemed untenanted, for no noises came down to where he stood.

One man passed, then another and another, but not until he heard the footsteps of the fourth one did he stir.

"That ought to be him," he said. "The prey ought to be approaching the net, and as this is a desperate case, it needs desperate remedies. This man may be nearer his goal than we think. He may have seen me receive the package from the window. He may have been on my trail all the evening."

This seemed too much for Talbot, and he placed his hand which had been sprinkled with the contents of the vial against the jamb of the door and waited.

In another moment the feet he had heard came to the very door and he drew back.

What if Velvet Van should enter the hallway? But, then, how could he know that he (Talbot) had stopped there?

Sure enough the door opened and he saw between him and the light a figure that sent a thrill through his soul.

The fox of New York was upon him—had tracked him to the hallway, and if he put out his hand would actually touch his face.

"This will never do!" muttered Gold Button. "This is the best place for the play. I have been seen by no one but the ferret and he may not be found for hours. Gods, what better luck could I ask for?"

All this was passing through his mind in a space of time whose brevity cannot be measured.

The detective was now inside and as he had shut the door and all was dark, Gold Button could only mark his position by guesswork.

Suddenly the hand of the man of the Gray Clan was sent forward.

It touched something that recoiled, and the next instant Talbot threw himself upon the ferret.

The gloved hands found a human throat as if by intuition, but they were almost instantly shaken loose and Talbot went to the other wall like a stone hurled from a catapult.

"He has the strength of a lion, this man has. He knows that it is a fight to the finish—that he must conquer me or stay here to be found dead by the police."

At that moment the right hand of Talbot was seized in a grip which he could not break. It prevented him from using the terrible weapon with which he had just provided himself, and with that hand held away from the ferret's face, he was practically powerless.

Still Gold Button, desperate and as strong as a giant, struggled against the consummate skill of the man with whom he contended but whose face he could not see.

They went from wall to wall in that narrow passage; now he had a momentary advantage, now the detective had it his own way.

"You are dead now!" hissed Talbot. "Don't your hands sting?"

There was no answer.

"The deadliest poison in the world is in my gloves. You have tracked your last man, Velvet Van. You have gone too far with the Gray Clan. Don't you feel a horror at your heart—a sting like the pricking of a needle?"

The answer he received was a quick fall against the dark wall at his back, but he managed to straighten and to send his antagonist from him with a curse.

The next instant he was free!

Gold Button stood erect and listened.

He had heard no fall and of course could see nothing.

"In heaven's name, what has happened?" he asked himself. "I didn't hear him drop, yet the poison must have done its work."

He put out his hands, but they touched nothing.

"This is the greatest mystery of my life," he cried. "In the name of fortune, what has become of the man of the trail?"

He stepped forward and felt all about him in the dark. He moved his hands in every direction, even stooping and feeling near the floor.

The longer he did this the deeper grew the mystery.

"It's more than I can stand," he thought again. "I daren't strike a match, but I can steal out and leave him here for the police."

Gold Button went to the door with a feeling of genuine uncanniness at his heart; he opened it and let the light in.

Before he stepped into the street he ventured to look back. With eager eyes he turned his face toward the spot where he had had his battle with Velvet Van; the light shone on the steps and the floor at the foot of the flight.

There was nothing there.

Gold Button, the member of the Clan, stood like a person suddenly confronted by a ghost.

He could not believe the evidence of sight.

"This is the devil's work," he exclaimed. "I didn't hear Velvet Van go out, nor did he seem to fall, but all at once he released my hand and all became still. Not here, eh? Is he in league with the fiends of darkness? By heavens! it looks that way."

He opened the door wider and illumined the

whole interior of the place, but there was nothing there—no human figure but his own.

Mystified more than ever, he went out. The air seemed close; there was a man near by, but he was paying no attention to him, had not seen him emerge from the house.

As he passed the light he happened to look down at his gloved hands.

"Great Caesar!" he cried. "Did he rob me besides getting away?"

The glove of the right hand was torn and half gone. It was the one which he had sprinkled with the deadly drug, and while he gazed at it he seemed to lose color and to gasp for air.

"It's the narrowest escape of my life! I must rob myself of the remainder," and plunging into the nearest alley, he tugged away at the torn glove until he had removed it from his hand, when, casting it away, he turned back and, white-faced, entered the first saloon he reached, and gulped down a glass of liquor that seemed to burn its way to his toes.

The Clan's best man had had the closest call of his career.

He alone knew how near death he had been.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE POISON OF THE WOOTANG.

DOCTOR JAGGER, the learned man who had measured Halliday Hood's life, sat alone in the little office and laboratory attached to his elegant residence.

The hour was getting late, but not too late for the doctor, and when some one stepped in, he looked up and smiled.

He was confronted by a man who came forward and took from a bit of paper the torn portion of a glove, which he placed before the doctor.

"Perhaps it would be best to handle that with care," said the doctor's visitor. "But first look at this hand of mine," and the speaker put out his hand, which the man of science began to examine with his critical eye.

"I don't think I got much of the poison on my hand, though the escape I have had is not to be laughed at if my antagonist told the truth."

Doctor Jagger looked from the hand to the bit of glove, and then into the face of his caller.

"We will see about the glove," said he, taking up the article and leading the way to a little room adjoining the one which they occupied.

There he turned rather suddenly upon his visitor.

"I have been some time placing you. You are Mr. Cue of the detective police."

"I am not connected with the police, but I am Van Cue," was the reply. "You have visited a gentleman who thinks his time measured. Indeed, I believe he claims that you told him about how long he has to live."

"I have to tell a good many that in the course of my profession."

"But this case is an extraordinary one."

"Yes."

"The Man in the Satin Mask still lives, but says that you have told him that the grim monster will close in on him in the near future."

Doctor Jagger started a little.

"Is this torn glove in any way connected with him?" he asked.

"I should not be surprised if it is," was the answer.

"I will ask no more questions, but go to work at once as you want to know what is on this piece, for you tell me, or intimate, that it has been poisoned."

Velvet Van settled back in a chair and watched the doctor as he made a test calculated to discover the secret of the poisoned glove.

It took some time for the man of science never did things by halves and then guessed at the rest. He worked as if a human life depended on the result, and he did not know but one did.

"There is something remarkable about poisons," he said, looking over his spectacles at the ferret. "I have seen traces of some curious ones since settling down to practice in this city. I have not always been here, as you may know. I took a course in toxicology in Paris, and added to my skill by a trip in the tropics. The tropics are the home of the deadliest poisons in existence. The skill of some of the poison-makers there baffles the learning of the most skilled of civilized scientists. This seems to be a tropical product."

"I did not know," said the detective. "I have been on the trail of a mystery, and of late have discovered that one of the persons connected with it came from the tropics, but long ago."

"These secrets keep. They can manufacture this poison outside of the tropical belt, but of course the maker must know the full secret of its compounding. Did you feel pains in your hand when you had touched the glove?"

"A sharp pain like the prick of a needle, and then a dullness as if the hand had become frozen?"

The doctor nodded and opened a little case above the experiment bench.

"It must be the poison of the Wootang," he said. "It is a product of the Malayan Archipelago, and there are few people who are instructed as to its making."

"A state secret, eh?"

"Not exactly that, but it is one of the secrets of the islands of the sea. There is a story to the effect that its secret has never been divulged to a white person."

"But I tore the glove from the hand of an American."

"In a struggle?"

"In a fight for life."

"You see I don't question you very closely, for I have no right to do so, yet I am deeply interested."

"No more so than I am."

"Perhaps not. You could not have much contact with the glove. I mean that it must have been by accident that you tore it off, for I am convinced that if you had grasped it firmly, allowing the poison to get into the body through the pores, you would never have brought the relic of your struggle to my office."

The eyes of the ferret wandered to the bit of glove which he subsequently picked up.

"I have intimated that this glove is connected in a manner with the Man in the Satin Mask."

"You ought to know, for you are a detective."

"How long will he live, doctor?"

"There is no exact telling. He may hold out a little longer, for the same poison, but in another form, is in his veins, and he is as surely doomed as the man who finds the rope dangling over his head. The Malayan death-agents vary their work. They can kill at once or take life gradually."

"The same poisons, doctor?"

"The same ones."

Ten minutes later Velvet Van, the ferret, rose to depart. He looked down upon Doctor Jagger and the bit of glove and at the same time felt a twinge of heat in his hand.

"Some one is fighting you with the deadliest weapon ever used in this city," said the man of medicine. "You are in the shadow of the Wootang tree and if you ever get the full strength of its juices in your blood all the skill of the world of science cannot save you. You must be on your guard all the time. You must look out for 'number one' and if struck—fairly struck, I mean, and you missed death by a hair to-night—there is no salvation for you, Velvet Van."

"I will look out."

"Wear gloves," said Doctor Jagger, glancing at the detective's hands.

"I want the enemy to feel my grip without them."

"It's at your own risk, then. You go back to the trail knowing the sort of weapons that are pitted against you. You must not say in after life that you were not warned."

"I will not accuse you at any rate," smiled the Shadower. "If I fail, doctor, I shall not come back to you—"

"The chances are that the Wootang will not let you come back. You have been marked like the other man."

"Like Halliday Hood?"

"Yes."

"And by the same hand. I tell you, doctor, I have felt the hand of the nabob's enemies. I have felt the sting of the poison that is sapping the life of the hidden face."

"The more reason why you should be on the lookout."

The detective of Gotham went down the steps in front of the doctor's house and looked back at the little window in the office. He saw there the watchful face of the man of science and with a brief glance walked off.

Half an hour later he turned up in the house once occupied by old Ramon Ravenclaw, but, as we know, it was deserted.

The spring-maker and all his household had vanished and the ferret had come to the place on a singular mission.

He ascended to the room lately occupied by little Juno and Muriel and there struck a light.

When the match had blazed up he began to search the room. He went over the walls as if looking for some inscription there. Did Juno ever write out her dreams anywhere else than on the black-board which Papa Ramon had prepared for that purpose? Was she in the habit of writing them out on the wall, or had he schooled her in the art of coming down to him with her chalk and giving him all the benefit of her wonderful powers?

Van Cue moved his match over the wall and looked at everything that resembled writing.

High and low he looked, but nothing seemed to reward him. Evidently Juno wrote for no one but the maker of springs.

He was almost at the end of his hunt when he stopped and leaned toward one of the walls. There were some sentences there, but so faint that he had to strain his eyes to make them out.

"She wrote what is here when wide awake," muttered the detective. "Certainly this is not the work of a dreamer."

By degrees he mastered the writing on the wall, and saw that what the child had left there was a record which he felt was a new link in the chain.

But in the midst of his inspection a door opened, and that instant the match he held was dashed to the floor.

He heard some one come up the stairs, and

then the door opened within a foot of his hand. Velvet Van drew back, and finding a latch in the dark, lifted it and dropped out of the room into another as dark as Erebus.

The next minutes his eyes were blinded for a moment by a flash, and he looked out upon a man who stood in the room he had just left.

It was old Ramon!

The old man had come back to the den he had inhabited, and now stood in the chamber which for some time had been little Juno's abode.

There was an expression of mingled fear and eagerness on the old fellow's face, and the detective, looking through a crack in the door of his closet, saw him lean toward the very writing which he had discovered.

The sharp eyes of Ramon Ravenclaw did not hunt long for the writing on the white wall, but found it at once as if he knew where to look for it, and with greedy eyes he was drinking it all in and seeming to gasp while he read on.

When the old spring-maker reached the end of the writing, he raised a hand and began to rub it out.

"I don't blame him," said the hidden ferret to himself. "I wouldn't let it stand if I were in his shoes. What is he going to do now?"

The old man, who had applied the match to a candle which he had discovered on a shelf, was slipping across the room, and after a while he found a button, which he pressed and saw a door in the wall slowly open, revealing a dark place hardly large enough for a human hand.

Into this hole the dark hand of old Ramon was thrust, and when it came out it gripped a curious-looking object which the ferret at first took for a gourd's handle.

It was the shape and color of such an object, but it was a different thing entirely.

The eyes of Ramon Ravenclaw seemed to blaze afresh when he looked at what he had found, and standing in the middle of the room he eyed it curiously for some moments.

All at once, however, he turned it up and took off a cap which fitted one end and then something fell into his hand.

"That's curious," said the ferret to himself. "The old fellow came back to rob the hole in the wall. I would like to know what he found in the gourd-handle; but he would not tell me, of course."

For some time the old man looked at what he had taken from the strange-looking thing, when he was seen to put it back and step toward the wall again.

In another moment the handle had been restored to its place and the little door was shut.

"I don't see why he didn't take the handle with him. Is he afraid of being robbed where he is? And in the name of common sense what is in the handle, anyhow?"

Old Ramon crossed the room to the door, taking the light with him, and the detective from his place of concealment saw him quit the room.

For some time Velvet Van did not stir. He listened with all ears for sounds that would proclaim the old man's departure from the house, and when he heard the opening and closing of a door below he crept from the closet and stood once more in the dark room.

Of course his first move was toward the wall where the hidden niche was.

His fingers were now his eyes, and they felt the wall in search of the secret button.

Finding it at last, he pressed it sharply and heard the opening of the little door.

His hand discovered it in the dark, and in another moment he had in his grip the handle-shaped object which old Ramon had taken from the place.

Opening it at one end he tilted it up and something dropped out in his hand.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A LOVER IN THE SHADOW.

THAT which the ferret of New York felt in his hand was a roll of paper.

He carried it to the closet from which he had lately emerged and there struck a match, which he held over the roll.

"Is this what the old man came back to look after?" he said. "It is important enough to bring him back to his den and I am obliged to him for coming while I was here."

The match did not burn long, but long enough for the ferret to see that the paper was of the utmost importance, and instead of carrying it back to the hole in the wall, he transferred it to his pocket and bore it from the house.

Velvet Van turned up in his office a short time later and locking himself in began to look at his find.

There were several papers, but the longest one was the most important in his eyes.

There appeared at the very head of the document a name which had been uppermost in his mind from the beginning of the trail—that of Toby Sharp.

But he was not to get far into the paper, for all at once a knock quick and nervous was heard and he looked up.

"For God's sake if you are in there I must see you, Captain Van!" cried the person beyond the door.

"That is Ott," said the ferret, opening the door and admitting a young man who rushed

into the room with a wild look in his eyes and white face.

"I fear we will be too late. I have lost but little time since I made the terrible discovery. You must save her ere it is too late for she—Muriel—has fallen into the hands of the Gray Clan and will be sacrificed by its people to clear their road to the riches of the nabob."

The detective caught the young man, forced him rather roughly into a chair and then bade him calm himself and talk coherently.

Oliver Ott was the lover of Muriel. He had plighted troth with the girl who had left the house of the Satin Mask for old Ramon's den, and when he discovered that she was menaced by a deadly enemy, had gone to Velvet Van with the story.

"I can't tell you all where I have been," said young Ott, after a pause. "I have been tracking one of the league through the city."

"You?"

"Yes. I ran across her—"

"A woman, then?"

"A woman, but one of the coolest and cleverest that ever plotted against one of her own sex. I ran across her watching a house over in Brooklyn, for I must tell you that by the merest accident I found out where old Ramon has hid himself."

"That is a bit of news which even I will welcome," said the ferret. "Go on."

"Well, she gave me a good deal of trouble, so much so that once or twice I lost her altogether, but at last I tracked her to a house which she opened with a key. I think I ran her down, but that did me little good. I was looking into the house by the way of the shutters which let out a glimmer of light when I was suddenly thrown back, not by any human power, but by a shock which I could not locate. When I came back to myself, as it were, I was in a strange part of New York. I was not even near the house to which I had tracked the woman, but, instead, stood looking up at the windows of Halliday Hood's residence."

"Do you think you had been carried thither by any vehicle?"

"I can tell you nothing at all. I only know that I was thrown back from the window by a sudden shock and that when I came to I was in front of the masked nabob's house."

"Alone?"

"Entirely alone. I heard no one and not a human figure came in sight."

"But you came in here imploring me to save Muriel."

"Did I?" cried the excited lover. "She is in danger—has been ever since she came under the ban of the Clan. Muriel may be with old Ramon and little Juno's companion; but the fact that I was on the trail of a woman who undoubtedly knows where the old spring-maker and his household are hiding, is proof enough that something must be done, for I am willing to swear that she was the head of the league—the woman known to the city as Mrs. Norah Blake."

"But to us as Rene of the Clan, eh?"

"That is right. She is the woman I tracked to-night."

"You must remember that she is not the only female connected with the Clan."

"I know that; but I think I used my eyes to good effect to-night. I could see that she was veiled and had the step of the woman called Norah."

Young Ott looked into the detective's face at the conclusion of his narrative and waited for a reply.

"You may have wandered to the spot where you found yourself upon recovery of your senses."

"I'm sure I can't say. I did not remain there long, but turned back and came direct here."

"You were not tracked hither?"

"I think not."

"Wait."

Velvet Van threw on a hat which he pulled down over his eyes and left the room.

Flitting down the steps into the street he stopped at the threshold below and stood like a statue there.

A man standing across the street with his face turned upward toward the detective's window attracted his attention and he fell to watching the figure deftly hidden by the shadows.

"Just as I thought," he said with a smile when he re-entered the room where Young Ott waited for him.

"My God, you don't say so? Where is the spy?"

"Across the street."

In an instant the lover half drew a revolver, but the ferret laughed.

"Let him look all he pleases. There are traps which the Clan do not set. This man is on guard; he will put himself upon your track the moment you quit the house. You must submit to it."

"What, submit to this accursed espionage of the Gray Clan which is against Muriel?"

"Yes. You must let him track you, I say."

"But he may be armed."

"He is armed, but with a weapon which is

deadlier than the revolver, for that misses its victim sometimes."

The answer received by the city Shadower was a wild stare.

"You have told your story now, haven't you?"

"I believe I haven't more to say at this time."

"Then go down and give the spy something to do."

Oliver Ott hesitated.

"Is all this for Muriel's final good?" he asked.

"It is for Muriel."

"Then I go without further questioning. The spy may track me if it is for her. He may shadow me with his hand on the deadly weapon you mention, but he must keep his distance."

"Whatever you do don't touch that man."

Oliver Ott looked astonished.

"What if he closes in on me?"

"I don't think he will do anything of the kind," smiled the detective.

"But he might, and yet you say I am not to touch him?"

"I say so again. You don't know some things. You must not touch the hands of this agent of the Gray Clan."

"Have they a vise's grip?"

"They have more than that: there is death in those hands. If you were close enough you would see that they were gloved."

"Could you see that across the street?"

"No. He stands in the shadows, but I know. Go now. Let the spy of the League track you home."

"I must go home, then?"

"That is best."

"And you?"

"I will not be idle."

Oliver Ott looked once more at the ferret and then glided to the door.

Stopping there, he glanced over his shoulder and said good-night.

When he reached the street he threw a look across it and thought he saw a man standing opposite the building inhabited by the shadow-sharp.

"Here goes on Velvet Van's authority," he said to himself as he started off. "If I am to be watched by a man armed with secret death, I will not let him get the start of me."

Once he looked back and saw a gliding figure. It came into the lamplight for a moment and then lost itself among the shadows again.

Young Ott felt a cold chill sweep to his heart. He had never been tracked before and to feel that a spy was at his heels tracking him up one street and down another was to say the least, decidedly uncomfortable.

More than once he felt like disobeying the detective's injunction. From what he saw of the man on his trail he believed he was his physical match and he longed to stop in some alley and waiting for him to come up spring out at him like a tiger and dispose of a tracker forever.

The only thing that held him back from such action was not the ferret's commands, but thoughts of Muriel.

The tracker might prove his superior in the fight; he might overcome him and then the girl would be lost forever. No, he would not turn on the night-wolf of the streets; he would carry out the detective's instructions and baffle the trailer by going home.

He did so; he let the man at his heels have his own way about tracking him and went home.

Locking the door behind him he threw himself upon a chair and caught his breath.

All the time he more than half-listened for the footsteps of the trailer on the stairs.

"If he follows me in he will be confronted," cried Muriel's lover. "That would be carrying the joke too far. I will not be hunted here in this house and because I am trying to keep a young girl out of the death-clutches of the Clan. They must not track me across this room. I will meet the spy if he comes up the steps, gloves or no gloves."

But young Ott was not called upon to meet the man who had tracked him under the lamps of Gotham, for no footsteps came up the steps and silence reigned in the house.

As for Velvet Van, the keen trailer of the streets, he had quitted the little room which Oliver Ott had invaded with his somewhat exciting and mysterious story.

The spy could not track two persons at once and when the ferret descended to the pavement there was nobody there to take his trail.

He looked after Oliver and his enemy but saw them not.

A trip across the great bridge landed the detective in Brooklyn.

Another journey over the streets of the sister city brought him to a quiet-looking house on a very dark and quiet street and he sidled up to one of the windows and listened.

He distinctly heard the sound of a hammer smiting metal and a smile of satisfaction crossed his face.

"Found at last," he murmured. "That is the little hammer which makes springs for the nabob's watches. Old Ramon is at work and must be laughing over his visit to the old den across the river. But if he knew that the roll has fallen

into other hands I dare say the hammer would not fall with quite so much accuracy."

The figure of the detective at the window was as dark as the shadows themselves and he listened for many minutes to the regular strokes of the little steel hammer which he knew from experience was wielded by a master.

"What will he say, I wonder?" he asked himself as he turned to the door of the house and knocked gently.

He knocked again before the hammer ceased its sounds and then a shuffle in the hallway told him that old Ramon was approaching.

The door was opened just a bit and when the serpent-like eyes of Papa Ramon looked into the face above the step, he fell back with a cry.

The detective slipped into the house and gripped the arm of the astonished spring-maker.

"Don't you see that you can't hide from everybody?" he said. "You have a nice place here; but they have found you already."

"My God!"

The face of Ramon Ravenclaw was white and he stammered as he fell back to the room where he had been at work. There he turned upon the detective and cried:

"How do you know I have been discovered?"

"The spy has been tracked from your window."

"When?"

"To-night."

The old man was silent for a moment.

"Can it be that I was shadowed from New York?" he gasped.

"It is likely; but how is the child? Why don't you tell her enough to let her dream out the mystery?"

"No, no; I tell her no more," was the quick response. "She dreams out too much, and, besides, I haven't got her any longer."

Velvet Van, who was looking deep into the eyes before him, could not repress a start.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have given Juno back to her mother?" he asked.

"To—her—mother?"

"You understand me, Papa Ramon," was the answer. "What has become of Juno, the Dream Child?"

The old spring-maker sat speechless before the detective.

"She's gone to join Toby Sharp!" he suddenly laughed.

"Do you mean that she is dead?"

"Ask the ghost of old Toby, ha! ha! She dreamt out too much for me, that child did."

The hand of the ferret darted hawk-like at the old man's shoulder; but he sprang up and rushed across the room. The next second he seized something from the bench and dashed it into his mouth, to fall to the floor insensible.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RENE ON THE TRAIL.

VELVET VAN, recoiling from the sudden fall of the old spring-maker, looked at the work of the mysterious drug.

"Does he know something about the poisons of the tropics?" he exclaimed. "Why shouldn't he if he is the person I think he is?"

He stooped over the form lying on the floor of the workshop, and looked down into the face that lay in the light.

Old Ramon was dead; there was no doubting the glassy stare in the fixed eyes, no questioning of the wrinkled face under the lamp by which he had worked for years. The old man had taken his life, and with his exit from the world had probably followed the mystery which now shrouded the Child Wonder's disappearance.

Juno would never again dream for her strange guardian; she would not waken in the night and go down to where he worked, to write out her wonderful visions on the black-board.

And old Ramon had told the ferret that she had gone to join Toby Sharp, and Toby was dead enough!

A silence which nothing broke came over the scene in the spring-maker's den. Velvet Van was the only spectator, and when he had made sure that death had ended all, so far as Ramon was concerned, he fell back and crept from the room.

Was Ramon the sole occupant of the house? What had become of Muriel?

He was not as familiar with the interior of the place as he was with that of the den left in New York, but he went into the rooms, one after another, looking for signs of Muriel and Juno, but without success.

It might be true after all that the child was dead, and that Muriel, fleeing from the hands that had taken her young life, was far away, hiding in a new place, and waiting for the end of Halliday Hood's career.

In course of time the ferret came back to the chamber of the dead.

He had found no one else in the house and believed that the lips now silent forever had told the truth—that Juno was as dead as her old guardian, and that the secret of her life would remain forever a profound mystery.

Velvet Van did not quit the house until he had subjected it to a thorough search.

He looked through it for a clew that would

solve or lead him to the new mystery, but none rewarded him.

He went off leaving the old spring-maker dead on the floor of his den.

He recrossed the bridge, landing in New York, and appeared in a certain part of the city and near a house at which he looked with singular curiosity.

"The secret lies in there—I am sure of it," said he, under his breath. "That house holds the secret of Tony Sharp's death, but it is not so dark a secret as it was."

He watched the house a while seeing a light in one of the windows which were well shuttered and just as he was turning away the front door opened.

A figure came down the steps and stood for a second on the sidewalk.

It was the figure of a woman and as she looked toward him but without seeing him, the Shadower caught a glimpse of her face.

"It is the creature of the Clan," said Velvet Van. "What is to be done now, my night-bird?"

Rene came toward him, but saw him not as he stood against a tree, and when she passed he threw himself upon her trail and followed.

The Queen of the Gray Clan did not pause until she reached the very house in whose hallway he had had his desperate struggle with the man with the gloved hands.

The head of the League stopped there and opened the door.

"In heaven's name what brings her to this house?" he cried. "It was in the hall that I encountered the gloved hand and felt the sting of the Wootang. Is that house one of her haunts, or does she believe that I crept up-stairs to die somewhere within its darkness, the victim of her wiles?"

At any rate Rene had vanished within the house and the detective slipping to the door heard her mount the stairs and her footsteps died away overhead.

There was an anxious look in the eyes of the woman who had entered the house.

She did not halt until she was on the second floor and there she stopped and struck a match.

Everywhere along the corridor she looked with eager eyes as if she had been there before and lost something very precious.

"Not here, and yet Talbot said he had hold of the gloves," she said just above her breath. "It is remarkable. Why, to touch a glove containing the poison is death, and here this detective had it in his hand and in his struggles must have pressed it hard."

The house seemed an empty one for there were no signs of inhabitants anywhere, and Rene felt safe in looking with her little light.

She reached a door and went into a room still carrying the light.

She searched the apartment with the same care she had bestowed on the hall, but the place was tenantless and she was compelled to admit that the mystery dark before, was darker than ever.

"Touched and not killed, that was the mystery!" she said. "I don't doubt Talbot's word for he would not lie to me. He met the ferret here. In this house he had a struggle with him and he had the gloved hand in his grip. He should have died in the hall below, but Talbot says he did not, but that he vanished very strangely and without a sound."

The woman of the Clan threw aside her burnt match and stood nonplused in the room. Her face was a study; it was mystery itself, and if the ferret down below could have seen her he would have smiled.

She went from room to room; she even made her way to the back part of the old house, and emerging upon a balcony that overlooked a cramped yard, wondered if the detective could have fallen from it.

Rene wanted to know what had become of the ferret of Gotham—the man "actually touched," as she would have it, by the poison of the Wootang.

Meanwhile the man for whom she was looking had slipped into the house and was waiting for her to come back from her hunt.

He heard her out on the porch and seemed to divine her motive. He listened until she came back, her match out, and she groping along the wall which would bring her to the flight of steps down which she could make her way to the street.

"It is very strange," he heard a woman say in the dark. "I never saw anything like it. Talbot was excited when he came to me with the narrative, but he seemed to tell a straight story. Why should he lie about this thing?"

She stopped a few feet from the detective who made ready to seize her should she touch him, though he did not want a collision in that place.

Rene came on at last, her feet marking out her course in the gloom of the narrow corridor, and the shadow-sharp hugging the wall on the left leaving her barely room enough to pass in.

"Wasn't it strong enough, or has the stuff lost its properties?" she mused. "Talbot knows how to use it for he has been instructed. He has seen the effect of the drug in another form for he has been watching the downward course of the Man in the Satin Mask. We are near the

end of the game; we will soon put forth our hands and grasp the prize."

The sound seemed to end with a laugh that had an echo on the darkness, and then the detective heard feet go down-stairs.

He felt relieved when he heard Rene open and shut the door that led to the street.

She had missed him by a hair; she had passed out into the night, leaving him to follow her whose hands dealt death wherever they listed, and who was playing for high stakes in the city of secrets.

When the ferret of Gotham reached the sidewalk after Rene, he saw the vanishing figure of a woman and started after it.

"I must not lose her now," he said. "I am on the trail of the Head of the Gray Clan. This woman knows the very secret I want to discover. She may not know that old Ramon is dead—I am ahead of her in that respect—but she knows some other things just as important."

Two hours later the man of trails sat in a room that was poorly carpeted.

He was not the sole occupant of the place. A woman reclined in a chair a few feet from him and her face was as white as a shroud.

This woman had suddenly touched his arm on the street, and with a cry fallen at his feet. And he had picked her up to discover that once more he was looking into the face of Mercy Sharp!

Toby Sharp's widow had a singular story to tell. She remembered having fallen in a faint at the foot of the steps leading to his office, whither she went after her escape from Gloria, the Gloved. She was found in the hall by an officer and taken to a hospital, from which, after hours of delirium, she had been discharged to go back on the hunt for him.

It was no wonder she fell again at sight of him, when she did not hope to find him short of the room he occupied when at home.

In the little room whither he had taken her he had listened to her story and promised that he would discover the hand that took Toby's life.

"I thought that perhaps you had abandoned the trail and I dared not ask after you while in the hospital," said Mercy Sharp. "I kept my secret pretty well, I think, and now that I am well again, I shall render you all the assistance I can."

"Tell me, Mercy, if you never suspected the secret which your husband must have carried?" asked the ferret.

"I suspected; but that was all."

"But you were carried off, you know, and by the Gray Clan. It must have feared you."

"Why should it fear me? I am but the widow of Toby Sharp and he is dead enough."

"But he was killed because of a secret which he knew, and wives very often worm secrets from their husbands."

Mrs. Sharp did not reply.

"There is but one person I really fear," she said at length, "and that is the man with the red scar."

"Talbot?"

"He must have more names than one. He haunted me long before the finding of Toby Sharp in the river. I saw him on several occasions on the street and now and then found him at my heels. Once in my hearing Gloria spoke of a person known as Gold Button, saying that if he would tell all he knew about certain things there would be a stirring of dry bones."

"Gold Button is Talbot."

"I have thought so, though I can't tell you why," said Mercy. "I have associated Talbot, the man with the scar, with the person called Gold Button by Gloria."

"Was Gloria the Gloved ever harsh toward you?"

"Never. More than once I caught her watching me with a look akin to pity. Do you recollect how her eyes gleamed that night?"

"The night I was confronted by her revolver and saw it flash in my face? I will never forget those eyes. But you were not in Gloria's house when you escaped to drop a letter for me into a street box?"

"No; I must have been in one of Rene's houses then; for I saw a magnificent woman there. She stood erect in the middle of the parlor holding up in the light an odd-looking vial the contents of which she drank gradually until not a drop remained."

"That was Rene."

"And the woman who knows the secret of Toby Sharp's death?" cried the widow.

The detective nodded.

"Do you think they will hunt me still?" suddenly cried Mercy, leaning toward the ferret, her face perfectly colorless. "There is something dreadful in feeling that you are shadowed by a death hand—that wherever you go you are watched, and by a league which can kill and leave no trace. I almost wish I had never seen the light of day. Why don't they hunt the rich, instead of the widow of a poor wretch who went to the river with the grip of the Clan at his throat, and was found there to be cut up by the doctors?"

Velvet Van could not but pity the abject creature who sat trembling in one corner of the room, and he vowed afresh that she should be

avenged, no matter who stood in the way, nor how many deadly hands were uplifted to strike him down.

"For heaven's sake lock me in here!" cried Mercy, clutching his arm when he went to leave her. "Lock the door and take the key with you. If you don't, some fatal curiosity might lure me to the street and back into the web of the deadly spiders. I hear in my sleep the tread of the spies of the Gray Clan. Lock me in and take the key with you."

The woman sunk exhausted into a chair and buried her face in her hands. And Velvet Van, stealing from the room, locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SATIN MASK IS LIFTED.

THE mystery of Toby Sharp!

The man who walked out of the room where he had just left the trembling widow, was smiling to himself.

Was it because the case had taken a new turn, or was he laughing over Rene's failure to find him in the old house where he had encountered Gold Button, the man in gloves?

While he walked through the shadows of Gotham, the Man in the Satin Mask, occupying an arm-chair in the room where he had stood face to face with the Queen of the Gray Clan, was watching the door that opened into the front hall, as if he half expected some one to enter.

The mask was down over the hidden face, and now and then he seemed about to put up his hands and dash it to the floor.

But no one came.

Halliday Hood wheeled his chair to the table, and took something out of a drawer.

This time it was not the mysterious vial from which he was in the habit of taking a strange sort of liquid which for the time sent new feeling through his system, but a white card at which he looked with curiosity.

"It is about time," he said half aloud, glancing at his watch. "If he is a man of his word, he will soon be here."

At that moment the clear tones of the clock rung through the house and the Mystery dropped the card back in the drawer.

Reaching out his hand he grasped a bell-cord and pulled it slightly. This act opened the door in the hall and a figure glided into the house.

Still watching the room portal like a hawk, the doomed man saw enter there a man who bowed as he came forward.

"Am I late?" said the stranger, who was rather tall, but with a dark skin and small snake-like eyes that emitted a fiery gleam.

"I gave you a few minutes," was the reply, the words moving the soft folds of the Satin Mask.

There was an empty chair opposite Hood and the visitor took it without invitation.

"You don't look like your old self," continued the Man in the Satin Mask.

"Don't I? Well, a good many years have passed and one grows old in spite of one's self. I can't tell how you look for that infernal piece of satin."

"No?"

"Do you wear it all the time?"

"All the time."

"It must be in the way and give you a good deal of bother; but it's your fancy, though I can't see why you cling to it. You don't fear detection, eh?"

Detection!

The word seemed to startle the Man in the Satin Mask and for a second he looked across the table at his caller as if undecided what to say or do.

"I got your letter yesterday and it gave me a shock," he said at last. "You must know that it was about the last thing I looked for."

"I suppose so."

"I expected an earthquake as soon."

"I don't doubt it."

"When did you come in? You did not say anything about that in the letter."

"I have been in the city a week."

"And without telling me that you were here?"

"Yes. I did not think it wise. How are my friends coming on?"

The speaker could have seen by the glitter of the eyes behind the mask that their owner was smiling.

"They're not all here any more," Hood said.

"What, are some of them dead?"

"One died very suddenly a short time ago and another is not far from the dark river."

"But you are in the land of the living, I see."

"By the mercy of the woman of the silken hand."

"Ho, how is that? The mercy of the woman with the silken hand! You must mean Rene?"

"I do."

The other did not reply for a second.

"I think I have seen her twice since reaching New York. She looks well, and I suppose knows as much about the deadly poisons of the Malayan forests as when she left them years ago with her

poor slave of a husband, who was blinded to the faults of the woman he never loved, though he made her his wife. By the way, where is he?"

"In the city. He is here and inhabits a den of his own in company with a wonderful child, who is said to be able to dream out the deepest mysteries of the day."

"A phenomenon, eh? Whose child?"

The hand of the Satin Mask came up over the table and for a moment rested there, while he looked into the eye of his visitor.

"I don't think we need to go into the biography of a child," said he. "Well, this husband is still living and calls himself Ramon."

"It was Ivan when he married her, wasn't it?"

Halliday Hood nodded.

"You remember Toby Sharp, the other witness? Well, the old man is dead. They picked him out of the river one afternoon, and the finding of the body has given one of the coolest of detectives a job."

"So a human ferret is in the case, is he? Have you had anything to do with him?"

"I have even hired him myself."

Hood's caller seemed to draw back with a shudder of fear, though he looked like a man who need not fear anything.

"Look here, Monon," the Satin Mask went on, "I am glad you have come, for you are the very man to play the cards I hold after they have dropped from my dead hands."

"Your dead hands?" cried the other.

"Yes. I speak with the opinion of my doctor ringing in my ears."

"But you don't look like a man on the edge of the grave."

"You don't know how I feel. You have been away for years, and now have come into the game just as I am about to make my exit."

"Nonsense! Don't you recollect the night—it was years ago—when we tracked through the streets of a certain city, and kept in sight a woman who led us a long chase and finally turned up at an altar, where she became the wife of Ivan Ravenclaw—against her will, of course? You said then that you would live to see her die in wretchedness. But that time has not come. She is here, living in splendor, and you haven't carried out your promise. Of course I don't know how you feel. I haven't even seen your face, for you persist in keeping over it that infernal mask."

"I have worn it so long that it has become second nature."

"Well, keep it on. I know how you used to look, and that will do for me. Now give me the outlook."

For the next ten minutes the Satin Mask did all the talking. He seemed to keep nothing back, as if the man who had come was a chum of former days, and there was no reason to keep anything from him.

The man called Monon listened attentively. He did not once take his eye from the narrator; he looked at his friend sometimes with an expression of pity and now and then with contempt.

"So you have told Muriel to go and remain away until after you are buried? So Toby Sharp has been murdered by the Gray Clan and you are in its toils, the victim of the deadly poison which has been administered by Rene through Talbot? It is a deep game and you may be in the shadows of the grave. Old Ramon lives for some strange reason; but don't you remember that she said she would not kill the man whom you made her marry, but that you and the witnesses should feel her hand?"

"She said that, Monon."

"And she has struck. This woman, with the coolness of a Borgias, and with the power of one as well, has gathered around her a league which seems to be as deadly as her own drugs. I don't blame you for keeping in the house. I don't blame you for sending Muriel off, for a look at you while living might turn all her affection into hatred. Do you believe the girl loves you?"

"In spite of my mask—despite the mystery that envelops me—I believe that I have a warm place in Muriel's heart."

"What has become of her?"

"I don't know."

"No news of her since she went away?"

"Only a line saying that she was safe, but beyond that nothing."

Monon leaned back in his chair and ran a dark hand through a beard slightly tinged with gray.

How the eyes of Hood watched him! How they looked with all the pent-up feelings of years at the face which seemed to have the consistency of parchment inasmuch as it was nearly expressionless.

"I may have stepped into the game a little late, but this woman shall hear from me," he said at last. "I am here to fight her for you; I am here to pay her back for the past."

"Be careful!"

"I will. I know something about her; I know how she looked the night she became the wife of Ramon, called Ivan then. She would not have the world know that, for her very existence."

"Nor would she stand forth in this city as the maker of poisons which are to be found among

the thieving Malays of the warm seas. She has an ambition, this woman has."

"She always had that."

"She expects some day to grasp the money I have accumulated. She has promised that it shall enrich the members of the Gray Clan, but not until I shall have gone to my grave, murdered by the agent which even now burns in my blood."

"Is there no hope? Did you consult the best authority?" and Monon bent over the table and seemed to look into Hood's soul through the liquid depths of glittering eyes.

"There is none. We can't overcome the juice of the Wootang. We can't fight here in New York the hellish brew of the disciple of the Malay poisoners. Let us turn to other things."

"But I don't like to fight her and her horde of silk hands and at the very threshold of victory see you die under the spell of the deadly vial."

Halliday Hood arose and went across the room. He seemed to take in the whole apartment with a searching glance and when he came back he lowered the light and leaned toward his caller until their faces almost touched.

"You shall see me, Monon," he said in a whisper. "I won't keep back the truth from you. You shall judge for yourself. You have told me that you have seen some victims of the Wootang; that once you went to the accursed home of the poisoners and studied the effect of the deadly brew. Look at me. This is the face I keep from the world, though when I go out—and I have gone beyond this house in order to fight Rene the Clan's Queen—I wear a mask which the sharpest eyes cannot penetrate."

The mask was lifted by one of the long hands of its wearer.

Monon looked with bated breath; his eyes seemed to start from his head.

"Well?" said Hood, as the mask dropped.

"I won't lie. You wear the seal of Wootang. You are entering the last stage of its hellish work; but I am here and I will baffle the plot of the Clan."

"You?"

"Yes. I am half Malay myself."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAN FROM MALAYDOM.

THE man who had come into the game remained nearly an hour with Halliday Hood.

When he went off his face wore a strange expression, and the moment he reached a room in one of the hotels of the city, he threw himself into a chair and laughed.

"I believe I have come into the play just in time. Rene is keeping her oath and there is a chance for me to feather my nest. I told him that I was half Malay myself and there is more in the statement than he dreams of. So Toby Sharp is dead, and old Ivan, or Ramon, somewhere in the city. Well, I don't care where he is for I won't need him. I wonder what there is in it for me, in the way of money, of course. She cuts a swell on the avenues and in the Parks, and that can't be done on nothing. Then, he is worth, to say the least, a million, while I, to whom he owes a good deal of his wealth, am at the foot of the ladder—the same Monon I used to be while beating the Malay chiefs at the games I taught them."

He opened his coat and took from about his waist a belt of serpent skin which contained some papers and a little money.

Placing it on the table he opened it, and removed several small packages done up in oiled silk. All the time there was a glitter of triumph in his eyes and his fingers moved rapidly.

The gray eyes twinkled.

"Hired a detective, has he?" he went on. "I would like to know what the ferret has discovered. I don't like 'em, never did. They generally manage to learn more about their employers than they ferret out concerning the case in hand. He did not tell me much about the one he has employed, but I don't care. I am not likely to meet him unless he gets in my way, and that might not be healthy for him."

All the time he was looking at and assorting the little packages he had taken from the snake-skin belt.

When he had finished he put back all but two, which he concealed in his waistcoat pockets, and then lighting a cigar strolled out.

Passing to the street he looked in every direction, and at last hailed a cab, in which he was driven over a long stretch of street to a house which he entered.

Mark Monon—that was the name he had written on the register of his hotel—seemed at home now.

He threw his hat in one corner of the room, and in another moment had divested himself of the iron-gray beard that had adorned his face.

Smooth-faced, he looked like another person, and no one, not even the man he had lately left, would have recognized him.

"I'm getting back to first principles," laughed he, seeing his reflection for a moment in a mirror. "This is my old self. I would not let him see me in the old garb—not for the world."

He did not lock the door when he entered the

room, and while he sat and smoked, something very like a smile stole over his face.

But he had been followed—followed from the very steps of Halliday Hood's house, and while he puffed his cigar a face was at the window and a pair of eyes were upon him.

Mr. Nick Carter, a gentleman with whom the reader is somewhat acquainted, had struck his trail at the very moment when he thought no one had followed him, and now he was looking in upon him and wondering who this man was who could discard his beard and appear as smooth as a priest.

"I lost Spira just when I thought I had her in my hands, for solid work. She crept to old Ramon's house and there I ran across her while I was searching the old place for traces of the child dreamer. She slipped away from me and is somewhere looking for Juno herself. I don't know where she is and she won't turn up so long as she thinks I want the child for selfish purposes. Now, here comes this man into the game. He doffs his beard and stands before me smooth-faced. He had a talk with the Man in the Satin Mask. Who is he?"

Carter at the window had the eyes of a hawk. He did not let a single movement of the man in the room escape him, but watched every one.

Monon, unconscious of the eye at the window, smoked on until he reached the end of his cigar. Then he began to undress for the night.

Nick Carter grinned when he saw this and resolved to learn more about him.

"Norah would give a good deal to know about him," he said. "His coming means something. It may menace the success of the game against the Satin Mask. I wonder if I can't make a stake right here?"

He waited, but not with the patience of one skilled in that virtue.

He lingered around the house until the clocks struck the hour of midnight. For him to go off and leave his play unfinished might be to lose a good deal, and the thought of the stranger sleeping near him with a secret at his mercy was too much for Carter.

It was past midnight when a footstep crept across the carpet of Monon's house. It was so soft that a cat would not have been roused by it and the figure of Carter with his face concealed by a long black mask went from room to room in search of the man he wanted to see.

He gained a room in which burned a tiny light, just enough to show him the bed and its silent occupant.

Nick Carter crawled forward and reached the garments which the sleeper had carelessly thrown upon a chair.

He knew that the snake-skin belt must be there, for he had seen Monon take it off and eye it as if it contained all that was precious in his sight.

It did not take the man long to draw the clothes from the chair, and in another minute he had carried them into the adjoining room, where he proceeded to inspect them at his leisure.

The belt was there.

Carter's eyes fairly snapped when he disengaged it and laid it out on the table.

Here and there he felt something which told him that he was striking it rich and when he unbuckled the straps that secured the treasure, his fingers fairly trembled.

All at once and just when he was taking the first bit of folded paper from the spotted belt, he heard a step and looking back saw to his horror the grinning face of Monon and in one hand which had been thrust forward the muzzle of a revolver.

A cold sweat seemed to come out upon Carter's brows.

Not a word was spoken, the six-shooter covered him completely, and behind it glittered the cool eyes of the man who had come into the game at the last stages of it.

The belt would have slipped from Carter's hands if they had been grasping it, but it lay on the table, and drawing back from it his eyes remained fixed on Monon while he expected to be bored by a bullet.

The man from Malaydom advanced into the room still looking at the thief.

"Don't move," his lips said at last. "I don't want to disturb you. It's a pretty belt, isn't it?"

This attempt at humor seemed entirely out of place to Nick Carter.

"You don't have such snakes in this country, eh? I never saw one myself, but, then, I haven't been here very long and don't know what you have in the serpent line."

"I never saw anything like it," Dick managed to say at length.

"I thought not. Please remove from the belt the object nearest the end at your right hand."

The member of the Gray Clan hesitated.

"What, are you afraid to touch the skin?" laughed Monon. "Keep your seat. I will remove it for you," and he came forward, the revolver still covering Nick and his eyes ready to send the bullet to the human target in front of him.

"Did she send you to this work?" asked Monon.

Carter started.

"I asked if she sent you to this work?"

"I am nobody's slave."

"Oh, you are not? You don't serve the woman who is playing the big game for high stakes? Your name?"

"Blondin."

"Are you sure that is it? Don't you think you have made a mistake?"

Carter did not reply.

It seemed to him that it was useless to try to deceive this man; that he knew more about him and Rene than he pretended, and that he was surely in the game, and in all probability he was an ally of the Satin Mask's.

"Stand up!" suddenly commanded Monon.

Carter did so, for under cover of that merciless revolver it was dangerous not to obey.

Monon looked him over from head to foot. He leaned forward and inspected him with the critical eye of the master of a training ship.

"There's the devil in his eye," thought Carter. "This man is coolness itself. I half believe he is going to kill me after all."

Mark Monon kept up his scrutiny until he seemed to have satisfied his curiosity.

"You are in the game; you know the whole plot," he said. "Sit down and tell me everything."

A chill ran over the man in the middle of the floor. He had never expected to go that far with Rene's secrets. While he wanted to get hold of Juno the child dreamer and work her for his own benefit, it had never been his intention to betray the Gray Clan, to a living man.

"Sit down, I say, and begin."

Carter, biting his lips till he felt blood upon them, dropped back into the chair at the table and looked across it at the man who had taken a seat on the other side.

"Go on now."

"What do you want to know?" asked Carter.

"You ought to know that without asking," was the answer. "I want you to tell me all about the plot against Halliday Hood—how you have been working it and all about the inside movements of the Gray Clan, with the names of its members."

Was ever treason so coolly proposed?

Carter had to look at the man with a gleam of incredulity in his eyes, but he saw that Monon was terribly in earnest and would not be trifled with.

"What if I should refuse to tell you anything?" he ventured.

"That lies with you. You can do what you please, but I will not be answerable for the consequences. I am here to take a hand in this game of slow murder. I came up from Malaydom some time ago, but did not know just what was going on until I met my old friend Hood—"

"Your old friend?"

"Yes. But we need waste no time. Begin!"

The revolver rested on the table, but the fingers of Monon were wound about the butt and his eye was fastened on the white face of Carter.

"The clock ticks on yon shelf. You can hear it distinctly and can count the ticks besides. I am going to let it tick off two minutes and they will determine your doom. If at the end of them you haven't started your confession I will leave you here for the rats or the police, I care not which finds you first."

Something came up in Carter's throat and he looked once more into the cool face of this man without mercy.

"If I lie he will kill, so why tell him that which he will know is false?" Nick said within himself. "Then, this is a good time for me to get out of the game and leave it to this man, the detective and the Satin Mask."

Another moment of silence followed and then Carter began.

He told everything. He went back to the beginning of the plot; he traced its workings from the time when Gold Button, as Talbot, got into Halliday Hood's house; he told how the secret poison of the Malays had sapped the life of the Satin Mask and how Rene had directed the hands of the dread Gray Clan.

Nor was this all. He told all about the play against Toby Sharp, he drew a picture of his taking off, with an accuracy which could not be doubted; he told how Spira had failed to kill Muriel in old Ramon's house and how Gloria had failed to finish the shadow-sharp in her own retreat.

He marked out the various houses used by the Clan, told how Rene lived and how she had sworn to strike a deadly blow against the man who years before had forced her to become the wife of Papa Ramon, the old spring-maker. The longer Carter talked the faster wagged his tongue and the more glib became his speech. He gave everything away much to Monon's amusement.

The man from Malaydom asked but one question when Carter stopped at last.

"What ever became of Hood's wife and child?"

Nick Carter's look instantly became a stare.

"I never heard of them," he said.

"Look here, man; I want no lie at the end of your narrative. You know that a few years ago Halliday Hood married; that he became the father of a little girl; that his wife was suddenly

deserted; that she threw the child into old Ramon's path—"

"My God! you don't mean Juno, do you?" cried Carter.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BLACK CARD.

"Did they call her Juno?" asked Mark Monon.

"I don't know, but that is the name of the dream-child."

"Why did you call her the 'dream-child'?"

"She has a wonderful faculty—that would make any one's fortune. Tell her something out of the usual run of events and she will dream out all the mystery there is attached to it. I tell you she must be seen to be appreciated and—"

"Where is she? What has become of old Ramon?"

"I don't know, I have lost them both."

"Then, you have seen them?"

"Yes. But they have vanished within the last few hours and, as yet, I have been unable to find them."

"Do you think Rene suspects that Juno might be the offspring of this secret marriage?"

"I can't say. She has so many secrets of her own that she must have some trouble keeping track of them."

"I want to find the girl. I must discover this dream-child, as you call her," said Monon.

"I want to find also the mother—"

"Is she living?" broke in Carter.

"I don't know that. Have you ever seen a woman hanging round old Ramon's house?"

Carter shook his head.

"Who is the ferret now on the trail of the Toby Sharp mystery?"

"Velvet Van."

"Where will I find him?"

Carter gave Monon the number of the detective's office.

"It's a cool game all around, eh, Mr. Blondin?" smiled Monon. "I never saw a deeper one and I have had to do with some pretty cool plots in my time. Now I suppose you will waltz back to your mistress and tell her that I have arrived in the city and am into the fight against the Clan?"

"I will do nothing of the kind. The accursed Code stares me in the face."

"You have broken it by your confession?"

"I have. I am even now in the shadow of death by the secret hands of the League. Do you think I will go back to Rene with the chances of having been watched to this house against me? I'm no fool."

"I don't take you for one, but you are free now."

The revolver slipped under the table and for the first time since the encounter Carter breathed with some freedom.

He found himself on the outside of that house with feelings that cannot be described. His head seemed to whirl and he was thinking about one part of the interview.

"What he suggested about Juno is what puzzles me," he said. "I can't believe it, yet he says Hood was married since coming back to America—they were across the water together for years; that he had a daughter who fell into old Ramon's hands. That means Juno and no one else; but the whole household have vanished. I wonder what Spira is doing now?" Is she back with the cripple?"

He started off toward the cripple's quarters and reached the house unwatched.

But Spira had not come back. Carter found this out before he withdrew, and when he was far from the spot he was touched on the arm by a finger and looking up beheld the figure of Talbot.

The man with the gloves smiled in a manner which rendered Carter uneasy, and it was not until they were together in Talbot's room that he regained his composure.

Gold Button had a curious look in the depths of his eyes and Carter watching him closely saw him glance toward the door as if he were expecting another party.

"I drew for you, Carter," he said at last, reaching into the depths of an inner pocket and taking out something at sight of which Carter felt a pallor sweep over his face.

"For me?" he almost gasped under the penetrating eyes of Talbot.

"Yes. You know that those who are present draw for the absent ones," was the reply. "I did that for you and—"

"And I won the black card?"

The answer was the unfolding of the paper which Talbot held in his hand, and Carter's eyes became riveted upon a black card of small dimensions which fell out upon the table.

"It is to be the last mission," he went on. "After its accomplishment we will have nothing to fear and the spoils of the game will be ours at last."

Carter said nothing, but sat and stared at the card as if it bore his death sentence.

"Why don't you take the card and read what is written thereon?"

With a great effort Carter reached across the table and picked up the bit of black pasteboard.

His hand trembled and Talbot saw that his face was absolutely bloodless.

Slowly the card was brought before the white face of the man who held it and his lips moved.

The card itself was covered with strange-looking characters which did not bear much resemblance to letters; but they were too intelligible to the unlucky Carter.

He let the card drop from his hand and looking up at Talbot met his gaze with a stare.

"Don't you see that you have the post of honor?" said Gold Button.

"I thought I was to look after Spira?"

"Let the woman go. The man is the important prey just now, for the traitress is suspected of having told him a good deal. I will see after her. Take the card and destroy it. You want to go about this work with nothing criminating on your person. Here! I arm you."

The hand of Talbot came up over the edge of the table and a pair of gloves fell from the paper he laid before Carter.

"You don't know how dangerous this mission is."

"What! didn't I take the same chances of drawing the black card, and wasn't Rene in the lottery?" cried Gold Button. "You forget that for months I have been living in the very shadow of death. What would have become of me if the Man in the Satin Mask had suspected that I was playing spy, and helping him down the road to the grave? You seem to forget my sacrifices for the Gray Clan, and there you sit, refusing to carry out the Code by repudiating one of its articles."

Carter spoke not. He felt on his forehead a cold sweat, which seemed to grow colder the longer he looked at the fatal card.

"Take it or let it lie!" said Talbot, sternly, and he seemed to lean across the table.

Once more Carter took it up.

"You know how to wear the gloves," continued Gold Button. "The rest is comparatively easy."

"I would like to know how. This man is one of the shrewd ferrets of New York. I have never pitted myself against a man of this kind. He is even now on the trail—"

"And if he is not turned aside, woe to all of us, Carter."

The winner of the black card started up with the paper containing the gloves clutched in his hand. His eyes appeared to bulge from his head. He breathed like a man gasping for air.

Upon all of this the cool Talbot looked with something like amusement.

"Good-by."

Carter held out his hand, but the other did not take it.

"Don't be a fool and play child before you start on the mission," sneered Gold Button.

"I won't. By heavens! you will find me not wanting when the time comes; but—"

Carter was himself again, and checked himself as if he were about to fall into unmanliness.

"Make no mistake," said Gold Button.

"How can I? There is but the one man."

"That is true."

"There is but one Velvet Van, and he shouldn't be hard to run down."

"He won't be if you understand your business."

Talbot arose and accompanied Carter to the door. They separated there, the one going down upon the street, the other moving back to the table, where he took a chair, to burst out into a laugh that echoed throughout the chamber.

"I hope he will have better luck than I had," said he. "I lost half a glove, and also my man. Carter will show spirit when he realizes the danger that environs us from this ferret who is determined to unravel the Toby Sharp mystery, for, when it is unraveled, the Clan goes to the wall. Carter will get it through his head before he goes far, and there will be some quick, sure work."

Gold Button went out, and after a short walk entered a house where he came face to face with Rene, the Queen of the Gray Clan.

"I delivered the card," he said, looking down into the expectant face of the woman in the velvet-armed chair.

"Did he flinch?"

"For a moment. It was unexpected, you know, but he got his old coolness before I left him, and even now he is abroad looking for the prey of the Clan."

"That is good. Carter is a mixture of strange qualities, but beneath them all is an unswerving devotion to duty. I have just come in. The Man in the Satin Mask has had a caller."

"The detective?"

"No. He has had audience with a stranger, a man with an iron-gray beard who came and left alone."

"Was it an appointment?"

"I cannot tell, but I rather think it was. Beyond this I know nothing, only the moment I saw the man something thrilled me and for a moment the figure looked familiar. Talbot, I would give thousands if you were back at your old post."

"It is too late now."

"I made it so by my foolish visit. If I had not gone to the house to be discovered by the

Satin Mask, you would be there to-night and the interview between Hood and the strange man would become our property."

Rene and Gold Button could sit in the parlor of the former and talk thus, but they could not see what was transpiring outside in the shadows of the metropolis.

They could not see the man who had been armed by the Gray Clan as he made his way up one street and down another.

They did not see him creep up the stairs that led to Velvet Van's office, nor hear the key he took from his pocket click in the lock.

Carter stood in the chamber of the pavement fox—the man who had promised Mercy Sharp that he would run to earth the murderers of her husband.

There was no light in the room, but he ventured to strike one and turning it low enough to let him see the interior, he moved to the table and coolly took a seat there.

The face of Carter was tensely drawn. He looked like a man who had reached a desperate conclusion within the last few minutes.

"We can't beat this man," he muttered. "He has now a grip on the whole plot which can't be shaken off. Spira has told him all and she knew the whole thing. She has armed him so that all he has to do is to contract his coils like a serpent, and we are in the crush. The infamous black card has armed me with the mission of the devil! I don't propose to strike and fail, for fail I will. There may have been treachery in the drawing of the lots. How do I know that I drew the somber card? I have Talbot's word for it and he may have drawn it himself. They have suspected me before; Talbot may have told Rene about my proposition to kidnap the dream-child, and thus they may have sent me out upon this mission—to be caught."

He paused a moment.

"Then, there is the man who caught me in his room. He has come into the game and he looks like a cool-head who knows how to play a card or two. And he says that the Man in the Satin Mask was married once, that he had a daughter who fell into old Ramon's hands. No child ever dropped into them but Juno, the Dream-Wonder. Is she that offspring, and was Spira—"

A sound broke his sentence, and he sat bolt upright in the chair.

With his eyes riveted on the door, Carter waited for it to open, fully expecting to stand face to face with Velvet Van the ferret.

The steps came to the very portal and then the latch clicked.

It was a moment of suspense, but Carter did not quail.

The following instant the portal opened and the man of the Clan sprang erect.

He was facing a person who looked at him with a half-comical expression of countenance. It was Mark Monon.

"In the name of good and evil, what brought you hither?" exclaimed the person from Malaydom. "Are you arranging to sell me out to this spider detective?"

"Heavens, no! I came here on business of a different nature and was waiting for Velvet Van to drop in."

"Waiting with evil intent, eh?"

"Perhaps," and Carter showed his teeth in a grin.

Monon crossed the room and one of his hands dropped upon the other's shoulder.

"I will keep the chair warm till he comes," he said. "I guess I have the most important business with this fox of the street. You can go, Mr. Blondin."

Carter had to grin at the mention of the name he had given to Monon a short time previous.

He got up and started toward the door.

"Velvet Van is shrewd and doesn't like the man whom you call your friend," he said.

"Never mind that. I will stay until he comes if it is not before doomsday."

Carter was half-way between table and door when something fell at his feet.

Looking down, he saw that the package he had received from Gold Button lay on the floor and that the gloves had rolled from their covering.

"Bring me those gloves!" said Monon.

"You don't want to touch them!" cried the pale Carter.

"Then you shall. Mr. Blondin, you will oblige me by putting them on!" and over the edge of the ferret's table crept the same revolver into whose deadly depths he had looked once before that very night.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

JUNO DREAMS ONCE MORE.

No wonder Nick Carter hesitated. He knew the danger that lay in the gloves.

Looking from Monon to the glove, and then back again, he turned pale and almost dropped the fatal object.

"I won't press it," continued Mark Monon, with a smile which greatly relieved Carter.

"You need not stand there and turn pale. I won't force you to wear the gloves, but the next time, my man, you don't want to drop them when I am around."

He said no more, and the next minute Carter

was on the street and making time from the detective's room.

"I would like to know what that man is and why he is going to wait for Velvet Van," he said to himself. "Seems to me he has come into the game for no good, and that he will play the Old Harry if let alone."

Meantime Monon was waiting quietly for the ferret who did not seem in haste to come in and please him. He occupied the chair at the table, and looked around the little room while he waited, his eyes glittering every now and then, and a smile stealing over his face as if he had something surprising to say when Velvet Van should drop in.

But the detective was not to come to his relief.

Far from the room in the block, the ferret of New York was engaged in other work, and we will hunt him up and see what it was.

The mystery surrounding the disappearance of little Juno and Muriel bothered him not a little, and he was anxious to find both.

The sudden death of old Ramon in his presence was a startling side-play in the drama which he had been witnessing, and when he went back to the old house across the river, it was with the silent resolve not to come back until he had struck the trail of the missing.

It is true that old Ramon had told him that Juno the dream-child was dead, and that she would dream no more for any one, but the ferret did not altogether believe this.

The house was dark and silent enough, and he wondered if it was still tenanted by the dead as he had left it.

He was about to investigate when a figure appeared in front of it, and seemed to lean against one of the shuttered windows as if to peer into the room beyond.

Something about the figure, which was a woman's, attracted the detective's attention and he drew nearer and watched it.

It turned away with a strange exclamation which he but half caught, and as it came close he seized one arm and heard a sharp cry.

He had arrested Muriel!

The girl, looking sharply into the Shadower's face, essayed to smile, but did not speak.

"Were you going back to old Ramon?" asked Velvet Van.

"Heavens, no! Why should I, after what has happened?"

"Then you know that all is over with the old fellow, that he will make no more watch-springs for the nabobs' watches?"

"Is he dead?"

The surprise of the young girl was genuine, and for a second the detective looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"I was only looking into the house to see how he was coming on, and whether he had followed us."

"Had followed who?"

"Juno and I."

"Then the dream-child is alive?"

"Why, yes. Who told you that she wasn't?"

"The man in there," and the ferret glanced at the house. "I was told by Ramon, and he seemed to take delight in telling me that she would dream no more—"

"She would be dead if he had had his way," said Muriel. "But are you going in there?"

"No."

"Then let us go back."

"To Juno?"

Muriel looked at the detective with a fear which he did not fail to perceive.

"I am going to trust you. I believe that you are not against us—that you will not make wrongful use of the child's visions. I have her safe and sound. Old Ramon turned against her, and if I had not rescued her in the nick of time there would have been a dead child for the police to hunt."

Muriel led the detective to a house situated in an alley not far from Ramon's house, and in another moment they stood beyond the steps.

"I took this place because it was near him," she explained. "He would not be apt to look for us so close, you see, and here we have been ever since we became fugitives."

It was not long before the ferret of Gotham stood in the presence of little Juno, who looked astonished out of her lustrous eyes, and for a moment seemed to chide Muriel for bringing the Shadower to the house.

"So old Ramon died with a lie on his lips," said Velvet Van. "He told me that Juno here would never dream any more, that she was as dead as Toby Sharp—"

A singular cry broke over the child's lips, and she suddenly flew to Muriel as if for protection.

"What ails the child, Muriel?"

"The name you have mentioned must have startled her. She has shuddered over it in my presence, and says that she has been dreaming about a man of that name."

"Are you sleepy, Juno?"

The child sighed and looked up into Muriel's face.

"I know what you want; you want me to go to bed and dream out something for you."

There was no reply.

"I feel that I am going to lose my powers,"

she went on. "Somehow or other I can't have the visions I used to."

"They seem to weaken her of late," said Muriel. "But you can try her, Captain Cue."

This was just the opportunity the detective wanted.

He talked slowly to the child, whose hand he held, and was watched by Muriel, whose face wore a look of sympathy.

"I wanted to put her upon a trail which has puzzled me not a little," said he, when Muriel had come back from leading the child to bed. "I am near the end of the Toby Sharp trail, but there is still a great deal to do. I found in the house lately inhabited across the river a paper which opens up a new field of discovery. I saw old Ramon take it from a secret niche in the wall and look at it. I have it in my hands, and that is why I want the child to dream for me. Her mother is living. Juno's parentage is an enigma, and has a bearing on the case I am interested in. She is an important personage in the Toby Sharp mystery."

"That child?" cried Muriel.

"Yes."

For some time they sat in the front room of the house to which Muriel and Juno had fled, waiting for the effects of the story the detective had whispered to the dream-child.

"She will not come," said Velvet Van, at last. "We are going to lose our work and not learn anything through Juno to-night."

At that very moment the door leading to the stair opened, and the white but beautiful face of the dream-child appeared there.

In she came with a bit of chalk in her hand, but as there was no blackboard in the room, Muriel slipped a pencil in its place, and by the slightest touch led her to one of the walls.

Velvet Van went forward and leaned over Juno's shoulders with suppressed eagerness in his eyes.

For a moment she did not seem disposed to write at all, but then her hand was raised and the pencil began to move over the white surface.

Both Muriel and her companion looked with all eyes, and followed the lead as it went back and forth over the wall.

Juno wrote deliberately, and with the pencil firmly gripped between thumb and fingers.

"Heavens, look what she has written!" cried Muriel, falling back and pointing at the writing before them.

The detective said nothing, but was reading the words before him.

The pencil had stopped and fallen to the child's side.

"She has given up a secret," said Muriel. "She has dreamed her last dream, and it seems as if the effort has cost her her very life."

Juno was standing rigid before the wall, and her wide-open but unobservant eyes were staring into space.

"Catch her!" suddenly shrieked Muriel, as the child dreamer fell back with a strange noise. "We have taxed her too much. She is dying!"

Already the slight figure of the child was in the detective's arms, and Muriel, forgetful of what had been written on the wall, leaned over her and imprinted a kiss upon her cheek.

"Here! She has but fainted, and you know what to do," and Velvet Van placed the little one in Muriel's care. "Take her back to bed and bring her to. This is a revelation which enables me to pick up the last link of the chain."

Muriel turned her face toward the wall, and for a moment looked at the writing here; then, taking up Juno, she disappeared through the door and vanished.

Velvet Van read the dream-writing again, and seemed to make a mental note of it all. There was no danger of his forgetting a single word of it.

Suddenly he seized a bit of broken glass which lay at his feet, and in another moment not a word remained in sight. He had obliterated it all, and when Muriel came back to report that Juno had come out of the swoon and had dropped into a deep sleep, she was somewhat surprised to see what had taken place.

"You will continue to hide here," said the detective. "This is a good nest; they will not find you here."

"They?"

"You know who will want to find Juno now," was the reply. "You have not forgotten what was written on the wall?"

"Heavens, no! but who would have thought it?"

The door of the old house opened and shut, and the ferret of New York was out on the streets again.

Muriel leaned toward the wall as if she would read the writing, but lately there despite the obliteration which had been effected, but she looked in vain.

"You dreamed out the secret of your parentage did you, Juno?" she mused. "That detective is a clever one and knew just what to say to put you on the trail. I wonder if old Ramon ever went that far with you. Dead? Dead in his new den? Oliver, surely the clouds are getting the silver lining."

She went back to where she had left the dream-child and found her still asleep.

Muriel bent over Juno and kissed her cheek. The touch did not arouse the little dreamer, and taking a seat near the couch she fell to watching her, for she was now her *protegee* and in her hands to be guarded against a powerful hand.

Velvet Van crossed the bridge and was back in New York. If he had known that a man was waiting for him at his office he might have gone thither, but he went in another direction, and Monon grew tired of his solitary vigil and left the place.

The ferret did not stop until he opened the door of the room where he had left Mercy Sharp.

At the same time a sudden pain struck him in the neck and he turned to catch sight of a figure that vanished the moment he saw it.

Then he saw something else—a woman lying full length on the floor.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE EVE OF THE FATAL PLAY.

THE Mystery-Shadower forgot the sting in the woman lying at his feet, and stooping over her, match in hand, he looked down into the face of Mercy Sharp.

"The hand of the Clan," he muttered, and then lifting the body he bore it across the room and laid it on the couch.

At that moment the footsteps came to the door and went away.

Velvet Van turned to the portal and threw it open. Nothing was there but a streak of light that came from the jet he had turned on and nothing was to be heard.

Velvet Van went back to his friend and found her looking at him with a singular stare in her eyes.

"It was the man with the red scar between his eyes," she said in a whisper. "I saw him for a moment and then he went away. He held a glove against my lips and all became dark."

"The glove again," cried the detective.

"What, did you feel it?"

"Yes, I know, but you are not going to fall a victim to the Clan's cunning. I am near the end of the trail and you shall live to witness my triumph."

Mercy tried to smile her gratification, but the effort ended in a groan and the detective saw the head turn from him and the face grow deathly white.

"Now for the paper Spira gave me," he thought. "I was not to open it until I got into the power of the Clan, but I shall look at it now."

He took from an inner pocketbook a folded paper which he opened and tried to read.

Something glittered on the little sheet like particles of frost on the letters before his eyes and he had not mastered the first sentence ere a wild shriek from Mercy Sharp took him to her bedside.

"He was there again—at the door!" she cried. "I saw his face when you were not looking and—There! there!"

The detective turned toward the door, but saw nothing. It was closed but not locked, and dropping the paper on the table, he sprang forward and went down the steps three at a time.

On the street there was no one in sight, and after looking a moment he went back to the widow.

"He came back and took something from the table," cried Mercy, the moment she caught sight of him. "He came like a panther and with one grin at me went over there and seemed to snatch something from under the light."

Velvet Van sprang to the table, and sure enough—he might have guessed it—the paper had vanished and he stared at the spot where it had been dropped.

When he turned to Mercy Sharp she had sunk into a state that resembled death, and he fell back, locking the door after him and tearing down the steps once more.

"I believe there is no hope," he said to himself. "The Clan has found another victim and Mercy Sharp has gone to join her husband. The secret of that infamous poison must be got at. Its antidote, if there is one, must be wrenched from its possessor and there shall be no rest for me until that is done."

A man who saw the detective leave the house stood in the shadows and laughed at him.

"You did not get it fairly," he said. "I did not give you the full benefit of the glove. Carter will have to hunt you down after all and try his hand. As for the woman, she has gone to join her husband."

Velvet Van turned up in front of the house inhabited by the Man in the Satin Mask.

He had never met Halliday Hood in the parlor of his own mansion, but had encountered him in another place as Nixon.

This time he was about to ring the bell of the avenue mansion, for there was a secret which he wanted in full, though the hand of the dream-child had written it in part on the wall.

At sound of the bell the door was thrown open and he glided into the house. The hour was late, but the Satin Mask was up, and when the ferret showed his face in the light there was a sudden recoil and a quick cry.

"You were not to come here," said Hood, looking keenly at the man who confronted him.

"Never mind that. I am here, and that should be enough."

The Satin Mask had retreated to a chair and from it was almost glaring at his visitor.

"Well, old Ramon is dead."

"What, the old spring-maker?" cried the Man in the Mask.

"The husband of the woman called Rene and guardian of the Child Wonder."

There was silence for a moment.

"The woman known as the Widow Sharp has been touched by the secret weapon of the Gray Clan and ere this is with her husband."

"Is that all?"

Velvet Van thought he could see the intense glitter of the eyes behind the mask.

"I have found the girl who had been taken from old Ramon and she has dreamed for me."

"For you? And what should she dream for a man of your calling?"

The voice was eager and at the same time tinged with sarcasm.

"Why did you never call your child home?"

There was no start at these words. The figure in the chair seemed to grow into sudden rigidity and the eyes got a different light.

"My child? What do you mean?"

"I mean, why did you never take your child to your bosom?"

"Beware! You remember what I told you. You were to unearth the Gray Clan—I was to pay you for that—but you were not to meddle with my private affairs."

"I answered you then, as I reply now, that I would let nothing interfere with the workings of justice."

The hands of Halliday Hood came up over the table, but they were empty.

"You have spoken of a child. You have intimated that you have discovered mine," he said.

"I have found Juno again and she is your child."

"But her mother?"

"We will find her in time," said the detective. "Spira will turn up when she is wanted and there will be something for this city to talk about."

The Satin Mask bent over the table and the eyes beneath the satin mask seemed to burn their way into the ferret's brain.

"You have broken the agreement, but you will say there was none," he went on. "You have been tracking two secrets at once and while you were trying to break the power of this infamous Order I am fighting with its hellish poison in my veins, you have tried to pull the mask from my past. And now you come hither and tell me that you have discovered my wife and child, that I have been living more than a double life in this city. Spira you call her, do you? Why, you have told me that that was the name of a member of the Clan and that she was almost as dangerous as Rene herself—"

"But Spira has turned traitress; she has given away the secrets of the Clan—"

"And betrayed me besides?"

"That secret she kept inviolate."

"Then, how did you get hold of it?"

"The child, your own offspring, dreamed it out for me."

The hands on the table shut savagely.

"Where is she?"

"Safe," evasively answered Velvet Van. "She is in good hands. She is with Muriel."

The name sent Halliday Hood back into his chair.

"With Muriel?" he cried. "So fate brought them together, eh?" he went on.

"It seems so."

"I don't know why I should fight against the inevitable any longer: I might as well give up. You have ferreted out the one great secret I wanted to carry to the grave with me. Juno is my child and the woman whom you call Spira is her mother. I made her my wife when I was not the wearer of this accursed mask. She does not know that I am the prey of the Gray Clan—that she has been helping her husband down the dark road to death by spying for the League. She knew what became of the little one, though. She must have known that the dream-child guarded so zealously by old Ramon, was hers."

"Did old Ramon himself know it?"

"Keep anything from that wretch, will you?" laughed the Satin Mask. "Of course he knew it and I fancy he got the child to dream out a good many things for him ere he died. You boasted not long ago that you had Rene's husband under your hand, but you haven't now, ha, ha! The old scamp is dead."

Halliday Hood left the chair. His figure straightened before the detective and his eyes looked down at him.

"Go and finish the game!" he cried, covering the door with his skeleton hand. "You are near the end of the Mystery of Toby Sharp though I don't think you regard it much of a mystery any longer. You have to fight to the finish the Gray Clan whose work you have seen since sundown. There may be a traitress in their midst, but there is still a deadly power behind it all. The hand of Rene has lost none

of its cunning and the brew of the Wootang is as deadly as when it was first made among the jungles of Malaydom. I will be found here when your work is done. Come to this house when you have reached the end of your trail, but remember that the power of the Clan will not be broken until the very last. It will not die a quick death. The scorpion has to sting itself again and again before it dies. You can't kill the Gray Clan with a single blow. The shadow is still on your path. I offered you an antidote once, but you would not have it. You will need it before the game closes. I have no use for it. There was a time when if I had had it, I would not stand here with my face hidden and death at my heart-strings. But I detain you. Go and find who killed Toby Sharp!"

With the eyes of the impassioned speaker shining above him, the detective of New York sprang from his chair and crossed the room.

"I will be here when you come back if you ever come!" Halliday Hood went on. "I rather like you for your coolness and infernal persistence. I never saw a ferret just like you. You ought to know Monon," and he laughed while Velvet Van at the door wondered not a little who "Monon" was.

A strange thrill swept through him as he reached the door and opened it.

He felt that he was going out to the last work against the Gray Clan, that the last fight against the deadly and beautiful spider was about to be made, and when he closed the door he heard a laugh behind him and looked back to catch sight of a shadow beyond the window.

The detective went to his room.

If he had gone thither from Mercy Sharp's chamber he would have come face to face with Monon, the man from Malaydom; but now the little room in which he was accustomed to work out some of the mysteries of the trail was unoccupied and he was alone.

He sat down and wrote rapidly for a few minutes.

"If I fail, this will start another man on the trail," he said when he had finished. "The Man in the Satin Mask is right. This is the last throw of the dice of fate and mystery. Before to-morrow I will know everything. I will stand at the end of the Toby Sharp trail, or be with him across the river!"

That which he had written he carried off with him and the room was empty once more.

CHAPTER XXXV.

RENE ROBS THE ENEMY.

THE apartment in which a woman stood leaning against a wall of masonry and listening with one ear glued as it were to the cold stone was devoid of every sort of furniture.

A jet burned against the stone showing her the interior of the chamber and her white face contrasted strangely with her dull surroundings.

It was Spira the traitress whom we saw last lying insensible at the feet of the Queen of the Gray Clan, but life was still hers though she was the sole inmate of the place we have in a sentence described.

There was nothing to show what hour it was; the cell had no windows and the light burning against the wall did not indicate that it was night.

A thousand times had she tramped the floor under her feet. She had paced it like a tigress in her cage, always coming back to the starting point, there to halt and glare at the light as if it were her mortal enemy.

Rene had spared the creature who had betrayed the Gray Clan.

Instead of brushing the traitress from her path, she had given her a further lease of life though she was the inmate of an underground room from which with the dull gray walls of stones there was to be no escape for the body.

Spira had been there ever since her last meeting with Rene. She came back to consciousness with the light burning over her head and surrounded by the accursed walls.

She could not tell how much time had passed, whether it was night or day, though she felt the pangs of hunger which told her that she had been there some time.

Not a sound came through the stone to her listening ears. She had listened with all her might, but nothing had given her hope, for there was none in the light which showed her the dungeon.

To die there seemed her portion.

If she could have escaped—if she could have broken through the solid walls, and crept up the steps beyond them—she might have seen something that would have thrilled her very soul.

In one of the rooms above the underground chamber sat a woman whose face wore a look of triumph, mingled with a gleam of rage.

Rene was at home. The Queen of the Gray Clan had come in from the street to throw herself into a chair and watch the door she had just closed.

The clock near her was ticking off the first ten minutes after midnight, and made the only noise heard at that hour.

"That is strange news Talbot brought last," said Rene, speaking aloud. "He is dead at last, and the girl is missing. I wonder what the woman below would say to this? What would she

say if she knew that Ramon Ravenclaw has stepped out of the game, and that the new den he went to across the river no longer holds the wonderful dream-child? I feel myself freer than ever before, but I did not consider him very much in my way. But the Man in the Mask still lives and inhabits the house on the avenue. He lives, but with the sting of the dread death at his heart. And yet he thinks he will live to see me brought down by the ferret he has sent to the trail—by the man he engaged to hunt me, while, at the same time, he looks into the Tobias Sharp mystery. I am too much for them all. I told him the night he forced me into that infamous marriage that I would strike some other time, and that, though years passed, he should feel ere he died the vengeance of the Malay. I fancy that he realizes that a woman's oath is something—that he feels with every breath he takes the hand of the avenger. Spira has told the ferret a good deal, but she could not tell all, for she does not know it. She is in the dark concerning the identity of the man who hides his face from the world behind a mask of satin, and now she will never see that mask lifted nor gaze into the face of its wearer. Gloria, the Gloved, has vanished, but she will never betray the secrets of the Clan. She should disappear for failing to finish the detective when she had him in front of her revolver. Carter is afraid of his shadow and may not carry out the last mission. Talbot and I are the only ones who represent the Clan and its mission. Talbot has been inquisitive, but he will not try again to penetrate to the secrets of the Octagon Room. One experience in that direction is enough," and she laughed as she opened a little box on the table and removed therefrom a tiny vial.

No one came in.

"What will become of the child now that old Ramon is dead?" she went on. "There is something in this, for if the Man in the Mask has left a will, if, as Talbot says, he has a lot of papers in the secret room in his house, his blood may still inherit his fortune. Will he make all clear before he dies? Will he tell the world that Juno, as they call her, is his child? She must be found! This shall not be Talbot's mission, but mine. It is too important to trust even to Talbot. He might fail. I never do."

She left her chair and disappeared from the room, but in a few moments came back in a different garb and was about to seek the street when the door beyond the chamber opened.

"At last!" said Rene, waiting for the maker of the footsteps heard in the hall.

Her eyes got new light when Talbot presented himself.

There was a cold look in the eyes of the man who was the Clan's right bower.

White as a sheet, but handsome for all, he stopped in the doorway and looked at the garments Rene wore.

"You were going out, were you?" he said.

"I was. There is a trail that must be taken at once."

"The trail of the child?"

"Yes."

It seemed that Talbot suddenly recalled the proposition once made to him by Carter. Juno was worth much to Rene of the Gray Clan.

"I think I can find her," he went on, but the words did not seem to reassure her.

"I have other work for you. You seem to forget the man of the trail."

"I ought to forget him since I have had an encounter with him this night."

"And lost the quarry again?"

"And lost the quarry," said Talbot, looking at her.

"You told me—"

Rene stopped and came toward Gold Button.

"I beg your pardon. I meant nothing. This man has the cunning of a fox. He is a master of his profession. I know that it takes a clever head to catch him, that a failure does not mean final defeat. You have seen him to-night, you say."

"Yes."

"Did you try—"

"Of course I did, but he got away. It was not like the struggle in the hallway, but in the light. That is, I saw him for a moment and touched him. I had other business on hand when he came upon me. The next time I will not fail."

She gave him her hand and he touched it sparingly.

"What has become of Carter?" he asked.

"I don't know. The man is a coward."

"Does the shadow of the ferret frighten him?"

"It has driven him from the game."

Rene did not speak.

Gold Button threw at her a look that spoke volumes.

"We must close this game now and forever!" he cried. "There is no time to be lost. The man who has seen him—I don't mean the ferret, but the other person who has entered the drama at the eleventh hour, is about to undertake to bring him back to strength."

The woman went at him like a tigress and her hand closed upon his arm.

"What other man? Who has come into the game at the eleventh hour? Who has undertaken

to cure him—to break the death force of the drug I am queen of?"

"Wait until I get my breath," smiled Talbot. "You frighten all nerve out of me. Another man is in the game. He has been to see the Man in the Satin Mask; he has come from Velvet Van's abode; he looks like a man who has been where it is warm and where the sun gives people the hue of leather. This man—"

Gold Button actually drew back from the face he had before him. He had never seen anything like it. It no more looked like the face of Rene of the Gray Clan than the face of an angel resembles Satan's.

"Go on and tell me all."

The voice was unnatural. It sounded in Talbot's ears like a voice from Hades.

"Describe this man!"

He did so; he described Mark Monon.

"Where does this man live?" asked Rene.

"How should I know?"

"Don't lie to me, of all creatures! You know, for you were not the man to see him and let him go home unwatched. Give me his abode. He is the man of the eleventh hour."

Talbot again tried to get in an evasive answer, but Rene held him to it, and with her eye fixed on him and her fingers sinking into his flesh, he told her whither he had tracked and left the man from the land of the Malays.

"Are you sure you have made no mistake?" she said.

"I make none."

Her hand dropped, and he was free.

Talbot seemed anxious to get out of the house, and a minute afterward he withdrew, but among the shadows of it he halted and watched the door.

At the end of ten minutes it opened, and the figure of Rene came out.

She did not see the man on the watch, but crept away and disappeared.

"The eleventh hour man is going to have an adventure," grinned Talbot to himself. "He should have looked after her first, but it is his fault that he did not. I won't warn him, for what is against Rene is against me," and he followed the Queen of the Clan, but at a respectful distance, and did not try to overtake her.

Half an hour later the dark figure of a female drew near a house that stood behind several trees and looked at the number on the door.

A smile appeared on the white face when she saw it, and going up the steps she tried the knob.

"He puts locks between himself and the hand he knows is at work," she muttered. "But this won't save you. What, you try your skill on Halliday Hood?—you try the one antidote of the Wootang? Man, you will never see his eyes brighten under its influence; you will never feel new life leap through his pulses nor hear him praise you for your powers."

Rene drew back and retired. The shadows nestled around the house.

They seemed to take within their pale the place and its occupant, and all was still.

By and by she reappeared in the sumptuous parlor of her own magnificent mansion.

With a hand that had the same eagerness that looked out of her eyes she drew something from her bosom and dashed it upon the table.

There was the sound of a breaking vial and a colorless liquid ran across the veined marble.

"He is powerless now for there is his weapon!" she exclaimed, looking at the stream. "The eleventh hour man will hurt no one."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MYSTERY-SHADOWER WINS.

MURIEL sat watching the occupant of a little couch. The dream-child slept as if she never had disturbing visions, and the young girl who had been driven from the house of the Satin Mask in order that she might not look upon its master's face when dead, regarded Juno with a face of pity.

All at once there came footsteps up the stairs, and the watcher turned toward the door which she had locked.

The sounds halted at the door, and Muriel, grasping a revolver which had reposed in a handy drawer, crossed the room.

"Who is there?" she asked.

The voice started her.

"My God! how came he to find us?" she gasped.

For a moment Muriel stood undecided in the middle of the room, the weapon almost falling from her grasp.

"I come on no mission of destruction," said the same voice. "You are not alone, Muriel. I know who is with you and I must see you both."

Muriel opened the door and let the speaker in.

She stared anew when she looked into the eyes that glowed behind a mask of dark satin, and did not interfere when Halliday Hood advanced toward the couch where Juno slept.

"Bring the light hither, Muriel," said the strange man.

The young girl picked up the lamp and carried it forward. The Man in the Satin Mask took it out of her hands and held it over the calm face of Juno.

Muriel watched him, not the child. She saw a tremor sweep over his face and after awhile he set the lamp down and bent over the Dream-Wonder.

"One moment!" cried Muriel grasping his arm and thinking only of Juno's danger. "You have a mysterious disease. May you not communicate it to her?"

"By a kiss?" he cried. "I have a disease, but it is that which a deadly poison sends through one's body. It can't be communicated in a kiss, and, then, do you think I would thus seek to kill my own?"

"Your own?"

"Ah, you must know it all," and he arose from imprinting a kiss upon Juno's marble brow. "I have just kissed my child. You have wondered who you are, Muriel. I have seen that question in your eyes a thousand times. Did you ever think that you might be my child also?"

"I have thought the fearful and the impossible," was the answer. "I have racked my brain over the mystery till I have dropped asleep to dream the strangest dreams that ever came to humanity."

"You are not my child though you are my kin. My brother left you in my keeping when he died and I have tried to keep you as his offspring. But there lies the only creature who has the blood of Halliday Hood in her veins. That child's mother—"

The Satin Mask stopped and fell back.

"I will stop here! You will find in the secret room of the house the whole story of the Mystery; you will know how and why I have fought and fallen into the power of the Gray Clan. You will find in this paper drawn up for you and Juno the key to the room as well as to the mysteries it contains. I never had but one chance for my life since feeling in my veins the power of the Wootang, and I have lost that. He who carried in his possession the only antidote for the poison in every stage has been robbed. Mark Monon has lost his life-giving vial. I felt that he could not baffle the hand of Rene. He was despoiled last night and the wonder is that he was left to tell the story of the cool play."

A laugh shook the folds of the Satin Mask and Muriel saw the eyes get a singular glitter.

"So there is no chance for me. The detective may find, but it will not save the life I have harbored for forty-five years in my bosom. He may crush the Clan, as he has sworn to do, but it will not help me out of the shadows. You will guard Juno, your cousin, until the danger is passed. You will not emerge from this retreat till all is over. Old Ramon is dead. I had hoped to bring him and his wife face to face once more—to say to Rene: 'Behold the wretch to whom I gave you!' but he will hammer out no more wonderful springs, nor listen to Juno's revelations."

He stepped back to where the child dreamer slept and bent over her once more.

Muriel watched the face as it was lowered, but all at once it stopped and then its owner sprung erect.

"It is here at last!" cried the Satin Mask, staggering across the room. "If Monon had entered the game a week ago, all might have been well. Don't let the child—fall—into—the grip—of the Gray Clan!"

He had sunk into a chair, and when Muriel sprung toward him he waved her off.

Her cry startled Juno, and the child leaped from bed.

"Juno! Juno!" cried the Satin Mask.

Muriel, interpreting the meaning of the cry, caught the child and placed her in the man's arms. The long arms went tenderly about her, the mask was dashed aside, and Hood's lips were glued to the child's wondering face.

In a moment Muriel bent over this strange tableau, lamp in hand.

She could not keep back a cry.

For the first time in her recollection she looked into the long-hidden face, and knew that the hand of Rene of the Clan had done its terrible work.

The Man with the Satin Mask was dead!

There crept through the costly parlor of Halliday Hood's house, while these things were transpiring at Muriel's retreat, a figure that had the tread of a tigress and the eyes of one.

"Where is he? I am tired of waiting," the woman said. "I have robbed the man who came into the game at the eleventh hour with the antidote, but the Man in the Satin Mask still lives. I am tired of Talbot's dillydallying and intend to finish the play myself. I have set a death-trap for the detective—one that will catch and hold him. No more playing with gloves. He seems to be proof against them."

She went from room to room. She inspected the library which she had not entered since the night Hood had forced her to drink the poison which she rendered useless by one of her secrets. He was not there.

By and by she came back into the parlor. Something on the table attracted her and she picked up a letter sealed and directed.

"To Monon," she read aloud. "That is the name of the man I robbed of his weapon. Monon! You will be robbed of more than a

weapon the second time. I spared you because I could not take your life without giving you warning. But the next time, look out, Monon!"

She held the letter between her and the light, but could not read its contents through the envelope.

"Must I go back without him?" she cried. "Must I lose the play I came hither to make? After this play, the child dreamer! With all the detective's acumen he has solved, what?"

"The Mystery of Toby Sharp!"

Rene started as if she had heard the click of a pistol.

She had heard no one come in; the tread of the man who had spoken had not disturbed her, but there he stood, in the open door between her and the hall, a smile of victory on his face and triumph visible everywhere.

For a silent minute she glared at the cool-headed ferret. She seemed to look him over from head to foot, and at the end of her brazen inspection was a smile, but not like his.

"I am here," she said, holding out her hands. "Why don't you come and take me, Velvet Van? I had a trap for you—ah, you must have heard me say so just now—but it will never be sprung. You know whom I came hither to see? Don't you think he should have stayed at home for me? Ah, don't you want the Head of the Gray Clan?"

She laughed but the ferret did not stir.

"You are not ghost, but flesh and blood," she went on. "Have you discovered Talbot? and Carter? Am I the last of the flock? Well, I should be last!"

Her hand seemed to seek the folds of her dress. It vanished there.

The movement took the detective forward, but Rene, falling back suddenly, crushed something fragile between her white fingers.

"Who has won, Velvet Van?" she exclaimed. "Whose victory is this anyhow?"

He halted before a face that had grown red as if all the blood its owner possessed had rushed there. The glass had cut the woman's hand and blood was dripping on the table.

"You are at the end of the Mystery of Toby Sharp," she said. "The hand I hold out to you took his life!"

The next moment a woman lay at the detective's feet, and on the face into which he looked was a smile which lasted even after the dread Wootang had done its work.

It is six months later.

In the very room where the last tragedy of the Toby Sharp case was enacted a woman whose face is beautiful though pale folds a child to her bosom and calls her Juno.

Spira, the secretly wedded wife of Halliday Hood, and her child are at home at last.

Velvet Van discovered the prisoner of the walled cell; he brought Spira into the light and restored her child. The two inherited the million of the Satin Mask—a million which, if things had gone otherwise, the Gray Clan would have won.

Carter was never detected and the ferret did not look long for him, but Talbot—the sleek, cruel and cunning "Gold Button"—fell into the detective's grip and paid for his connection with the Gray Clan.

Monon, "the man of the eleventh hour," went away after his failure to break the force of the Wootang, leaving his true identity and motive as much a mystery as when he came into the game.

Of course Muriel became the wife of Oliver Ott, and the two found a home under the same roof that sheltered Juno and her mother.

Mrs. Sharp came back "from the dead," as it were, and lived to thank the Mystery-Shadower to whom she owed the avenging of her husband's death.

Juno dreams no more since her life with old Ramon; but Velvet Van never ceases to thank her for the "pointers" she gave him when on the trail of the Mystery of Toby Sharp.

THE END.

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